

DREAMER IN THE FALLS

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1

WATER WATER

In a single room house in the middle of Dreamer Village, a young girl, Torm, is working on some mixtures while her sister sleeps. Her sister has caught "Shadow Fever," but Torm has managed to keep death away from her sister's door by extracting a mineral from a river nearby. Torm has converted her half of the room into a chemistry lab made of brass parts, glass vials, tubes, dials, scales, evaporators, distillers and many other hard-to-name devices. Aiding her study are numerous books and old medical diagrams which Torm references so often, her eyes could fade the paper they're written on. The room is mostly wood and plaster, which Torm keeps dimly lit to help her sister sleep and reduce the sensitivity pains caused by the fever. The level of pain her sister has withstood from the fever is immeasurable. The fever produces painful black veins that burn the skin, stab the nerves, and typically kills its host within a few days, but Torm has almost found a cure.

"Water... water." Torm's sister calls out. Torm puts down a vial and quickly fetches her sister water and rushes to her bedside.

"Here it is, here." Torm gently says as she helps her sister sit up and drink. She takes a small sip and falls back to her pillow.

"Will this never end?" her sister asks.

"Just rest. It will be over soon." Torm replies as she puts down the water and adjusts her sister's vapor machine.

"I'm so afraid, Torm. I don't want to die." Torm's sister anxiously declares.

"Fear is good: it means your mind is working properly."

"Please, get this out of me."

"I am, little sis, we just need a little more time." Torm checks a few spots on her sister's body for black veins.

"What if the mixtures stop working? What if they start having the opposite effects and I start getting worse again?"

"Just a few weeks ago you couldn't even talk. And now I see the black veins growing smaller. You have nothing at all to worry about." Torm takes out a small dripper and a glass plate. "Okay, a few dream samples." Torm collects a few of her sister's tears and drops them onto the glass plate.

"Your dreams are getting more colorful." Torm tells her sister in a warmer tone.

"The dreams are the only thing good about the fever." her sister responds.

"I've read that some people give themselves Shadow Fever just to have the dreams."

Torm puts a dry white mixture into a vapor machine

that is at the side of her sister's bed. Torm adjusts a few parts of the machine and soon it releases vapors.

"I can only remember parts of them." Torm's sister confesses.

"I will show them to you when you are better. Now get some more sleep so I can go back to work."

Torm tucks her sister in and returns to her work.

2

GOLDEN FIELDS

In a dry golden field, early in the morning, Avio, a 17- year-old boy with big dreams to reach the top of the Great Falls, rolls up schematics and puts them into a cylinder as his friend, Bex, helps him load supplies onto a homemade air balloon.

"So, after thousands of years of man trying to reach the top of the Great Falls, in everything from bicycles with wings, to mile-long Legacy Ships, you think you can reach the top in this?" BEX asks.

"Yup!" Avio responds with pride. Bex sniffs the foul air near the balloon.

"This smells like your grandpa's old shirts." Bex comments.

"It is!" Avio admits in a bragging tone.

"You must have been dropped on your head a lot as a child!" Bex replied sarcastically. Avio anticipates the weight of a large bag.

"Here, help me with this." Avio asks Bex. Bex helps Avio lift the bag onto the balloon.

"You're going to leave me, your best friend in the whole world?" asks Bex.

"I've asked you a million times to come with." Avio states as he retrieves a radio. "Since you won't come

with me, I got these." Avio hands Bex a small gold radio. "They work on atmospheric pressure and have a range of 5,000 miles." Avio explains. Bex looks at Avio and responds with more sarcasm and an eye roll:

"Oh awesome, more nerd stuff."

Avio's attention goes back to loading gear.

"What do I have to do to convince you to stay?" Bex desperately asks Avio. Avio gets into his balloon and preps it for flight.

"There is something more than a source of water up there. I can't explain the feeling I get." Avio says seriously.

"Try!" Bex insists.

"It's hard to explain why I need to do this! Why I have to go! My grandfather told me: 'Chase every dream. Even if it kills you.'"

"That's stupid, he's an idiot. I'm going to kick him in his stones next chance I get." Bex responds. Avio shuts the door to the basket of his air balloon and fires up the engine. Bex gets serious.

"Look, I would never want to tell you to not chase your dreams, but no one from our village has ever come back alive. And I can't imagine a world without you."

"I will return. You just need to imagine everything that can go right, not everything that can go wrong." Avio replies while he tugs the engine line and tests it.

"You are a stubborn kid: Even if you knew you were going to fail, you would still have to try. I guess if

you got to go, you got to go."

"Where would this world be if we gave up before we tried? Don't worry, I will be back." Avio pulls the engine cord and the balloon lifts off the ground. "Untie the ropes." Avio shouts to Bex. Bex unties the ropes on the ground that are attached to the balloon. Avio pulls them up.

"You're an idiot!" Bex shouts to his departing friend. He watches Avio float away. Moments later, Avio sees a brilliant view of the Great Falls in the distance at sunrise. Over the next few hours, Avio crosses over dozens of towns seeing a great montage of things that he's only ever seen in photos. Bex can see the balloon far in the sky. Avio calls Bex on the radio.

"Are you there, Bex? Is the radio working on your end?"

Bex hears Avio's voice come out of the small speaker. He quickly studies the radio and then replies.

"It's not too late to turn back." Bex insists again.

"I left something with my grandparents and I know you're going to love it!" Avio announces ignoring Bex's complaints.

"What is it, a new friend?"

"It's a surprise, you'll see. And will you keep an eye on my grandparents? I don't want anything to happen to them while I'm away."

"Yeah, I'm on my way right now. I wish you would turn around."

"Don't worry, I'll be back before you know it."

3

BOOK ARM

Lilix, a young nurse in the Dreamer Village hospital, is preparing a mash of fruits, wheat, and root powder for Felsik, a 25-year-old paralyzed male who sits in a wheelchair nearby. His head is held in place by a leather strap and an arm attached to his chair holds a book in front of him, but he just stares motionless past the book into the distance. Nurse Rina comes in the room.

"I don't understand why you think he can read. It's a mystery you think he can do anything, given that he has never shown any real signs of awareness." Nurse Rina comments to Lilix with a snobby tone. She puts some objects down on the mixture table.

"Keep your voice down. He can hear you and you are being very rude." Lilix responds with a hushing tone.

"Even if he could hear me, his brain has as much awareness as this mush you feed him."

"Imagine you were in his place: trapped in a body, but inside you were yelling to the world and no one could hear you."

"Then I would hope someone would do the humane thing and end my life."

Nurse Rina picks up the rest of her items and exits. Lilix finishes up her mixture then goes to Felsik. She moves the book arm aside and sits in front of him preparing to feed him.

"Don't listen to her. She is what we call an idiot. I know you're in there, I see you." Lilix states to Felsik. She mixes some food with a spoon and then holds the spoon at his mouth. "I hope you like this flavor. If not, I am so sorry." Felsik's tongue moves a little tasting it. She lifts his head up to make the meal go down. Nurse Rina comes back in. She sees the messy table where Lilix was preparing the medicine and gets annoyed. She aggressively clears the table.

"How many times do I have to tell you that this is a hospital, not a playground for children? You need to learn how to clean up after yourself." Nurse Rina said sternly. Lilix turns to her in a panic.

"Wait! Stop! DON'T!" Lilix pleads. Nurse Rina ignores her. Lilix runs to her but gets there only in time to see her throw the mixtures in a trash. "Why did you do that?" Lilix asked irritated.

"Just make more." Nurse Rina responds dryly.

"I can't. That is all we have."

"Then order more." Nurse Rina counters. Felsik shows signs that the mixture is working: his eyes start looking around. He flexes his face and his fingers reach into the air trying to lift his hand up. But the nurses are too busy arguing to notice the miracle awakening just a few feet away.

"I can't." Lilix repeats.

"And exactly why can't you order more?"

Lilix is silent for a moment, reluctant to respond.

"...Because it comes from the Northern Provinces."

"The Northern Provinces?" Nurse Rina repeats shocked. "You know our village is forbidden to trade while in a trade and boundary dispute. It is illegal to use any goods that come from there."

Lilix's mother, who is the Head Nurse at the hospital, comes in.

"What is the matter here?" the Head Nurse inquires.

"Lilix has used an illegal mixture to treat a patient." Nurse Rina tattles.

"What mixture?" the Head Nurse asks.

"Lilix!!!" Felsik blurts out before Lilix can answer the Head Nurse's question. The nurses go silent. They look at Felsik. Lilix runs to his side.

"I told you he is aware of us and the only thing that can free him is gone, thanks to you." Lilix says to Nurse Rina with anger.

"It's illegal, you should not have been using it in the first place." Nurse Rina coldly responds as she picks up a medical tray and exits. The Head Nurse looks at Lilix and then at the mixture tables.

"What did you use?" The Head Nurse asks softly.

"A sample Torm gave me. She said she found a root in the Crescent Fields up north that would help repair the nerves and rebuild motor function." Lilix looks at Felsik. "And she was right." Lilix declares.

"She usually is. That girl is going to save the world." the Head Nurse responds as she takes Felsik's hand and looks him in the eyes. "When I

delivered you 25 years ago, you were limp in my hands, barely able to breathe and unable to cry. But I saw the life in your eyes and knew you were in there. And now by some miracle mixture, I get to hear the sound of your voice and feel you tickle my hand for the first time." Nurse Rina had burnt Lilix's last nerve and she was sick of it all: the attitudes, the heartlessness, and the unwillingness to see past rules to help a patient.

"I don't care about trade disputes or land quarrels... While they are trying to figure out what cow belongs to what farm and what line goes on what map, Felsik is trapped. He needs that root and because he can't get up and get it, we have to." Lilix goes close to Felsik. "I won't let you stay trapped forever." Head Nurse stands up in front of Lilix. "Mother, please don't try to stop me." Head Nurse just smiles.

"I wasn't going to."

"Oh, then why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm looking at you like this because I'm proud to be your mother. You put others before yourself and I would never stop you from helping them." Head Nurse straightens Lilix's collar and jacket. "So all I can tell you is be safe and don't get caught."

4

SHADOW FARMER

Near the Great Falls, a farmer is hand-tilling his fields. He has the most beautiful view of the arch that guards the base of the Falls. Its boat-rich river swims under its arms on for miles feeding every village, town, plant, and animal on its path. The farmer takes a moment to get a drink and enjoy the view he has of the Great Falls. Just a few seconds back to work, he feels his hand go numb. He stops tilling and tries to rub some feeling back into it. Then a sharp pain grips his body as a black crust takes it over so fast he is frozen in place before he can drop to the ground in pain.

5

GRAVE LILIES

Not far from the Golden Fields where Avio lifted off on his journey to see the Falls, a steampunk guitar leans against a tombstone. Bex comes up and sees the guitar. His eyes light up. He picks it up and talks to the tombstones.

"Why is your grandson so good at making things, but so retarded at friendship?" Bex gets an idea of how to let his friend know he got his gift: He plugs the guitar into his radio and turns the volume all the way up. "God, I hope he's sleeping." Bex says to himself.

Far away in a cloudy night sky, Avio is eating over the side of his air balloon, savoring his food. The radio turns on instantly full blast in a shrieking guitar sound causing Avio to drop his food. He turns it off quickly and looks down at the earth.

"Man! That was good too! I was really enjoying that." Avio says to himself. He turns the radio back on and calls Bex. He gets loud feedback, but it quickly dies. "I see you found your gift. How are my grandparents?" Avio asks through the radio. Bex unplugs his guitar and responds.

"Still dead." he says sarcastically.

"Just because someone is dead doesn't mean they don't need someone to take care of them." Avio responds.

"Their bricks are getting a little overgrown but I'll take care of it..."

"How do you like the guitar?"

"I don't know what to say about the instrument... it's the most amazing gift I've ever seen. Thank you."

"I'm just glad I'm far enough away I don't have to hear you practice everyday. Speaking of that, be careful not to overload the radio." Avio tinkers with the radio.

"It's not too late: you can still turn around. The Falls will always be there, but I won't. I really don't understand this need you have to get to the top."

"One day you will understand. A dream will find you and you will know what it's like to have the noise of the world stop because your dream is the loudest thing in your world..." Prophetic words since at that exact moment, Bex's attention is stolen by Lilix making noises in the field nearby. He slowly turns the volume down on Avio, who is still in speech, as he gets up to see who this girl is. Lilix has a shovel and a bag full of gear. Avio gets some signal noise on his radio, not realizing his friend has turned the volume down.

"Bex? Are you there?" Avio tries to get Bex back on the radio. Lilix is standing looking at a picture of a root. She looks around trying to find it. Bex comes out of nowhere.

"You look lost." Bex comments to Lilix.

"Ahhh! You startled me." exclaimed Lilix.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you. What is that you're looking at?" Bex asks.

"It's a root I'm trying to find, but I have to admit I have no idea what I'm looking for."

Bex comes over for a closer look.

"Grave lilies." he states and then digs one up.

"Yes, that's it." Lilix states while taking possession of it. "Why are they called 'grave lilies'?"

"I'll show you."

Seconds later Bex and Lilix stand at the lily-covered tombstones of Avio's grandparents. "That's why. They seem to thrive around graves. I think it's a mineral in the stones they like." Bex says.

"Who's graves are those?" Lilix asks.

"Just some really stupid dead people." Bex replies but Lilix sees the sincerity through his sarcasm. Bex starts digging up the roots.

"I don't want to disturb their graves." Lilix states in a considerate tone.

"Don't worry, I was already planning on cleaning them off. What do you need the flowers for, anyway?" he asks.

"They are for a patient. The root seems to work a miracle on him."

"Are you a nurse?"

"Yes, back in Dreamer Village."

Bex looks up with curiosity.

"I hear Dreamers can leave their bodies while dreaming. Is that true?"

"That's a myth. Dreamers are just like everyone

else, except the part of the brain that causes dreaming is larger and more developed, which gives us more control and freedom over our dreams. We are aware when we are dreaming and we also have the ability to go back into a dream we liked, but we remember less of the dreams than non-dreamers."

"Maybe you remember less because the dreams are so perfect, you wouldn't want to wake up from them and it's your brain's way of saving your body."

"You seem to know a lot about Dreamers. Do you know many?"

"Only you, but my friend Avio suffers all the symptoms of a swollen dream." Bex lists the symptoms with every sharp push of his shovel:

"Absent-mindedness... always wants to talk about the same thing... completely disregards his friends...Owww!!" Bex accidentally hurts his hand with the small hand shovel.

"Be careful... Are you okay?" Lilix hurries to his side. She looks at his hand and feels it for pain.

"Ow!!" Bex cries out.

"Sorry... I have something that will help." she states then runs to her bag. Bex leans up against a tombstone and waits for his nurse to return. Lilix accidentally knocks over the radio while fetching her bag causing its transmitter microphone to be activated. Avio is startled by the signal cracking though and he drops his food once again. "Nooo!" he cries out reaching for it in futility. He goes to his radio "reproach-ready", but hears the sound of a girl's voice: Lilix. He hesitates then decides to

eavesdrop when he hears Bex's voice:

"Is it broken?" Bex asks.

"It's not broken, just bruised. It's okay. You're lucky you didn't cut your fingers off." Lilix reassured as she wraps his hand up. "I'm more worried about your feelings for your friend. Why are you so upset with him?"

Bex becomes pensive but then opens up.

"I've been lying to my best friend since I've known him: he thinks I live up north with my parents and five sisters, but the truth is they all died from Shadow Fever when I was very young and I never knew them."

"And you're upset he left you alone?" Lilix asks.

"Yes. Avio is not just my friend, he is the only family I have. And if he doesn't come back, that makes these stones the closest thing to a family I have left."

Avio loses the signal. He desperately tries to get it back but with no success. Bex pauses in thought.

"Idiot!"

"Beg your pardon?" Lilix replies.

"Not you: Me! I'm an idiot. BEX the village idiot, the town moron, the king of all things dumb. Ahhhh!" Bex responds while moving quickly to his radio. He tries to call but the signal is lost. "Avio.... Avio. Come get me!" He can't get a signal. He quickly gathers all of his things. Bex looks at Lilix. "Sorry, I got to go. Help yourself to these old stupid dead people's stuff. They won't mind, they're dead. But if they complain, run!"

Far away in a moonlit cloudy sky, Avio reflects on the last words he heard before the signal went dead: the confession of his friend's family all being dead. The importance of his journey fades as he thinks about his friend.

"This isn't important." Avio says to himself staring at his maps. He crumbles them up and changes course back to home. He tries to get Bex on the radio, but all he gets is some random Sand Pirate chatter. He connects an antenna wire to the radio in hopes of boosting the signal but he gets nothing. "Bex, if you can hear me, I'm on my way back."

Both having change of hearts and unable to reach each other on the radios, Avio and Bex run blindly to each other.

6

SHADOW HARBOR

High in the Great Falls, a Legacy Ship breaks through the heavy falling water making its way to port. Hundreds of ships of all makes and sizes are coming and going. More than two dozen "tuggers" greet the Giant Legacy ship as it enters the harbor. The outer skin of the giant ship is a rusty green-black and shows its age, but underneath is a healthy thick iron. Its windows number in the hundreds of thousands and looks like a large Victorian greenhouse. High in a dock tower, a "bellman" rings a signal to the "tuggers" as they guide it in slowly. When they get near the dock, their lines are transferred to the "pullmen" and special reflective lights signal the pullmen to close the slack in the lines and secure the giant ship to its dock. All is going well when suddenly the water stops falling, revealing the rocks behind it. Soon a chorus of frantic bells send alarms through the air. The alert bellman looks up to see what's going on and is shocked to see a black crusty cloud descending, freezing the water in a dry black tar. The cloud tar grows fast and quickly takes over the entire harbor. The bellman tries to escape, but is caught by the dry black death.

7

DAILY ROUTINE

Torm is collecting mineral powder at a gathering station she built on the banks of a nearby river. With the river high and in healthy flow, her latest batch is good, clogging her collection plates with thick, white mineral resin. She had used spare parts to build the station, converting an old glass chandelier into a waterwheel housing for the collection plates. This utilizes greenhouse properties, increasing her average collection 1000% over free-floating plates. Torm is unusually intelligent and gifted and had earned a reputation as a genius from a very young age. In kindergarten while other children struggled to paint any recognizable animal or figure, a teacher discovered Torm using a mathematical method to paint an almost photo perfect image of herself. When the Schoolmaster was made aware of this, he had her tested at a local university. She not only had the highest scores in the school's history, but seemed to breeze through the subjects with ease. This prompted a series of exams from every department and to everyone's amazement, she outranked every teacher in every subject. A feat which is hard to understand, since Torm was only five years old. This made many

professors bitter and jealous, crying that she must have been aided in some way. But after retesting her under all the jealous teacher's conditions, they were forced to accept that Torm's intelligence is not only real, but dwarfs any other genius known to history. Her parents had a hard decision to make: either leave Torm with kids her own age so she has a chance to create friendships and live as a normal kid but holding her mind back from a chance to flourish, or put her in a university and struggle in a world of jealous adults with no chance of being a normal child. Before her parents could make that decision, they died under mysterious circumstances of which are still unclear to this day. Of all the possible subjects Torm could have pursued, music is the one that captured her heart the most. She used to spend most of her time playing violin and studying music, but her sister's fever has forced out Torm's medical talents and put a mute on her music career and she now spends all of her time working on a cure for Shadow Fever. After gathering her daily yield of mineral powder herbs, roots, plants and other items, Torm made her way to the Professor's house.

8

2ND FIDDLE

Torm is working on Shadow Fever experiments with the man who looked after her and her sister when their parents died. A close friend of her parents and a professor at the local university, he acted as guardian until Torm was old enough to take over the job. He had set up a lab in his house so he could assist her in the experiments. He happily plays second fiddle to Torm since she is intellectually his superior and offers him the benefit of expanding his knowledge while aiding the recovery of her sister. Using different strands of chemicals on Shadow Fever plates, they run the lab like clockwork.

"Your father hated noise and could be very impatient, not realizing how the words he chose to use would affect the people around him." the Professor stated while focusing on his work.

"Was he ever like that with my mother?" Torm wondered.

"Oh yes! But your mother's wit was unconquerable. One time when he was short with her, she told him: 'You're not very good at what you do, because everything you try ends up better than you imagined.'"

"Haha, that is funny... wait... is that an insult, or a compliment?" Torm asks confused.

"Both! But they were also the most tender couple I've ever known. I miss them very much." the Professor tenderly noted.

"I remember my father always had a giant book with him."

"Ah.. I wish I knew where that book was... the things his mind saw. I could have learned so much from that book. Luckily, he was only the second most brilliant mind I've ever known."

"The second most brilliant? Who was the first?"
The Professor looks at her with warm eyes.

"Without a doubt, you, dear girl! You."

"If I was brilliant, I would have cured my sister by now. She wouldn't be lying in bed in pain."

"Look at me, Torm." Torm looks at him. "No one has ever lasted more than three days. And how long has your sister survived? Two, three months?"

"Three months." Torm replies.

"Shadow Fever has plagued us for thousands of years and in only three small months, a little girl from a small village has almost cured what all the universities' best doctors and scholars, after hundreds of years, couldn't even treat! You will cure the world of this plague, Torm."

"And when another comes along?"

"Then you will cure that one. And then the next one and the next."

"No pressure. Sure, I can save the world." Torm mutters.

"You really can. And you are!" the Professor catches Torm hiding a smile. "Ah, I saw that smile. It's okay to smile, you don't have to hide it."

"I feel guilty."

"Guilty?"

"Yes."

"Because Shadow Fever is an intriguing problem to you."

"I shouldn't enjoy working on the solutions as much as I do... my sister's fever isn't a game, and yet at times, I admit I enjoy myself."

"Your enthusiasm benefits the world. If only more people enjoyed working on solutions instead of creating problems, we'd live in a much better place."

"Why is it taking so long to find what seems to be a simple solution: separate the bad cells from the good. My sister is missing out on so much and it..." Looking intensely into a microscope, the Professor interrupts Torm mid-speech.

"Torm, what sample number was that?"

Torm quickly fetches the number in the log book and sees the butterfly illustration.

"111, 'SOLIS LUX Rhopalocera.'" Torm reads aloud.

"'SOLIS LUX Rhopalocera'. The sunlight butterfly, of course! And the ratio?"

"One-part water mineral, 1/111th parts wing oil. What has happened?"

"Come look for yourself."

Torm moves to his position and looks at the plate under a machine.

"I don't see any ghost cells." Torm says to the Professor like a winning ticket-holder.

"Exactly!"

"Could it be?"

"Let's run it again."

They reset their plates when a large village bell rings.

"What is that?" Torm asks with a curious look on her face. The Professor has a serious look come over him.

"I haven't heard that bell since your mother and father passed away. You better get home. I'll run the tests again."

Torm hands him the plate and gathers her things quickly.

"I'll be back as soon as I can."

"Be safe."

9

CRANBERRY SUN

Torm can hear the village alarm bell as she makes her way back from the Professor's house. She stops by her water station, which she finds is struggling to collect water.

"Why is the river so low?" she questions herself. She shuts her machine off and continues homeward. On her way back, she sees an Elder attempting to fix a message line box, which is odd to her since she knows he isn't qualified to do so. She decides to help before he hurts himself or breaks something.

"Come on!" the Elder says annoyed at the box.

"I wouldn't touch those two lines together or you will short it out." Torm warns him.

"You scared me, Torm." the Elder says a bit startled.

"Sorry, let me look at it. You must have been getting a lot of messages. What was that bell?" Torm asks the Elder. He gets out of the way as Torm goes in for a closer look.

"It is an old message bell saying that lines are out. It's been nothing but chaos for the past 24 hours. We have sent out every messenger we have to find out why the river is so low and the number of message

lines that have been going out has left us short-handed, so in desperation I'm out here trying to help fix them." the Elder explains.

"It could be a crop village damming the water again or something."

"Negative: all the crop villages sent word this morning. They are having the same problem. Water is drying up everywhere. Can you see what's wrong with the box?"

"The power is very low. I suspect because the river is so low the power station's water wheels can't turn as fast, hence the low power." Torm replies.

"If the water doesn't return, major outages will happen. I need to see if there are any messages. We'll have to hand-crank the main lines."

Torm has a flash in her mind: animated graphics of how to fix the box. She sees a glass plate, a system of electrical and mechanical diagrams, and a berry bush.

"Hold on, I have an idea." Torm pulls out glass plates from her bag, some berries, wires, and small tools. She crushes the berries between the plates and connects wires to them and then patches them into the box. Instantly the machine starts working; it comes alive with noise and prints out a message. The Elder is amazed at her cleverness. Torm tears off the printed message and gives it to him.

"It works! How did you do it?" the Elder asks.

"I used the acid in the berries to create a solar grid that converts the sun's power into a charge. It should power it until it can be fixed properly."

The Elder's attention goes to the message in his hand. His awe turns to worry. He looks up at Torm and reveals the message to her.

"The Great Falls has stopped flowing. Sorry Torm, I must get this to the Council of Elders immediately."

10

HEART WALTZ

Torm comes home and finds her sister awake and anxious from the bells.

"So what was the alarm for?" Torm's sister asks nervously. Torm puts water bottles on her work table.

"The water in the rivers stopped flowing."

"What? Do they know why? Will it be okay?"

Torm pauses.

"Of course it will, this has happened before. Probably just a crop village damming the water for their harvest. Nothing to worry about." Torm caringly lies to her sister.

"What if the water doesn't start flowing again? What if the rivers stay dry and the vapors...."

Sharp pains take over Torm's sister. Torm comforts her.

"It's okay, let it go, shh, it's okay, everything will be okay. 'What if' has to be more dangerous than Shadow Fever."

Her sister's pain settles down, but leaves her weak.

"I'm trying not to be afraid, but nothing I think about helps." her sister confesses.

"Perhaps if I play for you that will take your mind off of these little problems. Would you like that?"

"Yes." her sister weakly nods. Torm fetches her violin.

"Okay then. What would you like to hear?" Torm asks.

"Mom and dad's wedding song."

"I haven't played that in forever, good choice."

Torm finds a music scroll and comes back to her sister's side where a music machine sits on a small shelf near her sister's bed.

"Torm?" her sister calls softly. "Torm?" she calls again getting Torm's attention.

"Yes, lil' sis?" Torm responds while loading a music scroll. Torm winds the music box.

"I'm sorry I got sick." her sister says with tears in her eyes. Torm pauses her winding and looks into her sister's eyes with love. Torm holds back tears.

"Close your eyes." Torm orders softly. Her sister closes her eyes. The box starts to play. Torm lifts her violin to her neck and follows its lead. A bittersweet dance in 6/8 titled "Heart Waltz" plays while her sister dreams of their parents dancing in a beautiful ballroom. Two minutes later, the scroll runs out and Torm takes the violin down from her neck and goes back to work.

HEART WALTZ

Music by
Jim King & Nicki Almond

8

5 8

9 8

13 8

17 8

21 8

25 8

29 8

11

CONCERT OF SQUIRRELS

Bex is at home packing his things. He tries to get Avio on the radio.

"I made a mistake, Avio. If you can hear me, please come get me. I can't let you go alone, which I already did, but you know what I mean. If you can hear me come and get me."

He puts down the radio and furiously packs. Both having change of hearts and unable to reach each other on the radios, Avio and Bex run blindly to each other. Bex makes his way to the golden field and piles his gear on the same spot Avio took off. He sits and waits while continuing to get Avio on the radio. Hours go by with no reply and he starts strumming his guitar to push away boredom. So shy about his playing, he looks around to see if anyone is watching. Only a few squirrels are there and their attention is on a few fallen acorns, so he starts to play. The squirrels poke their heads up, curious at the noise of his guitar. Bex starts to sing and sees the squirrels run away in fear. Embarrassed, he stops playing.

"Oh come on, I'm not *that* bad, give me a break I barely just started learning." Bex confesses to the squirrels. Suddenly a herd of animals smash through

his pile of gear and he sees the real source of the squirrels' fear: a black, shadowy cloud eating everything in its path. Bex panics and moves as quickly as he can to get away, but is frozen mid-run in a dry brittle crust.

12

DISHONEST MEN

Torm finds the Professor packing for a trip in a hurry.

"All my water reserves were taken and added to the village reserves while I was out gathering samples. What water were you able to find?" he asks Torm. She puts a bottle on the table. The Professor glances at the bottle, then returns to packing.

"Very insignificant amounts. The river is too dry to get any water." Torm replies.

"I knew I should have hidden the barrels when they were auditing the town reserves last month. I'm so sorry, Torm."

"Don't be sorry: your honesty is one of the reasons I know I can trust you." Torm states affectionately.

"To make things worse, I have a feeling they are going to order a village slumber which would make it illegal to even be awake. Your work would stop." the Professor states worriedly.

"What should I do?" Torm asks.

"Go to town and get water from where and who you can. We can't let anything stop you from working! You almost have the cure!"

"And you? What are you going to do?"

"I know a professor to the north who will sell me some barrels. Thank the universe there are still dishonest men in this world." 30 minutes later, Torm is using a pump attempting to get any water she can out of the low riverbed, but all she is getting is muddy water. She gets frustrated and heads to town in search of water. She first tries all the water distribution centers that have been set up, but they have all run dry. She then goes door-to-door asking nearly everyone in town for spare water, but is met with the same dry answer from everyone: "We don't have any water". The next house she came to belonged to Phong, a deaf man she had developed a sign language for. She was reluctant to knock on his door, since she felt asking him for anything would seem like asking for payment for once having helped him and she didn't want to make him feel as if he owed her anything. But she put her feelings aside and went to the door. She knocks and a few seconds later Phong opens up.

"Do you have any river water to spare?" she asks in sign language.

"We only have the rations from the village supply, but we need those." Phong signs back.

"I understand."

Torm begins to walk away.

"You can take this week's rain collection. I doubt there's even half a bottle's worth, but you are free to take it." Phong responds catching Torm on her exit.

"It has to be river water." she replied.

"Have you tried the village supply?"

"All the water hubs are dry."

"Try the hospital." Phong suggests.

13

SECRET MIXTURE

Lilix secretly prepares a fresh mixture from the root, making sure Rina can't see her. Rina comes in. Lilix hides her mixture quickly and works on another.

"Is that Mrs. Whitesaw's daily?" nurse Rina asks.

"Yes." Lilix replies shortly. Nurse Rina notices that the medicine locker is open, making her angry.

"Uh, the medicine locker is wide open again? Lilix, why do I always have to remind you. If something goes missing, you will be to blame."

A service bell rings for the main doors.

"Ugh, what now?!" nurse Rina states annoyed as she shuts the medicine locker. She pauses at Lilix on her way to see who is calling.

"Try to have that ready by the time I get back." nurse Rina states like a dictator. Once she sees nurse Rina out of sight, Lilix returns to her root mixtures. At the doors of the village hospital, nurse Rina comes out to see who rang the bell and finds Torm waiting.

"What did you need?" asked nurse Rina coldly.

"I need any river water you can spare." replied Torm.

"You're Torm, right?" nurse Rina asks.

"Yes."

"It's amazing that you've been able to keep your sister alive for so long, but we need the water for patients who actually have a chance at surviving."

"If only you knew how close I am to a cure."

"No one has ever survived Shadow Fever."

"Please, I need the water."

"I can't let you have it as I have already explained."

"What do you suggest I do?"

"I see two options: one, get the river flowing again. Or two, say goodbye to your sister."

Nurse Rina shuts the door on Torm and is caught by surprise when she sees the Head Nurse standing behind her.

"What did Torm want?" the Head Nurse asks already knowing the answer.

"She wanted to know when the next town hall meeting was." nurse Rina lies while walking away.

"If the hospital wasn't short-staffed and in desperate need of nurses, I would dismiss you instantly without regret." the Head Nurse thinks to herself while watching the lying nurse walk away. Moments later, the Head Nurse chases down Torm as she walks down the street. Torm stops when she hears the nurse's voice calling out for her. She turns around and sees the Head Nurse carrying a container of water.

"Torm, I'm glad I caught up to you. Here, take this. It really is all we can spare. I'll try to get more when I can." Torm takes the container.

"Thank you! Any amount helps more than you

know."

"No, Torm. I should be thanking *you*." the Head Nurse states with a warm thankful tone. "We have made amazing leaps in treatment because of you. The Professor has shown me the work you have done on Shadow Fever and I believe you will soon find a cure for your sister."

Torm breaks out into tears. Nurse looks at her with kind eyes and hugs her.

"My world doesn't work without her. I need her."

"Well if the world wanted her to be taken by Shadow Fever, the universe disagreed and made you her sister!"

"That rhymed." Torm responds with a small laugh breaking through the tears.

"Well, truths often do." the nurse replies. Torm steps out of the hug.

"Is there going to be an order to slumber?" Torm asks.

"If a slumber does take place, I'm afraid I won't be able to help you. The Captain of the Guard and his men will be in control of our village and I'll be with the rest of the village, deep in dream. But don't think about that. Your mind needs to be on the little fever puzzle. So hurry back to your sister."

Torm adjusts her bag and steadies the water container getting ready to walk.

"Thank you." Torm states with a warm heart then makes her way back home. The Head Nurse watches Torm walk off then returns to the hospital.

14

ELDERS VOTE

In a large empty room of the hospital, the Head Nurse, who is also an Elder, is having a meeting with other Elders about the latest developments on their efforts to solve the water crisis.

"It's only the first week of distribution and the reserves are halfway empty." stated Elder Munyer in a narrow, concerned voice.

"Halfway? Are you sure?" asked the Head Nurse surprised.

"And that's only giving out a quarter ration." Elder Munyer continued.

"I've done everything I know how to do in order to raise the water supply... I don't know how to explain the dry grey clouds, they just don't give any water. And I've tried everything else from sky evaporators, toxic water converters, produce milking, dry-net atmospheric capturing, and a dozen other things. We got so desperate, we even had to impound villagers' personal water reserves. I really just don't know what else to do. I feel so helpless." Elder Lund expressed.

"You're working so hard, don't give up. We will find something that works." the Head Nurse replied tenderly to Elder Lund. "What about the other towns

and villages, can they spare anything?"

"We have received replies from all 111 known villages and towns, even the villages we are in disputes with. This is happening to everyone, everywhere! I think the only real option we have left is a village-wide slumber." Elder Munyer answers.

"I have to agree. I just don't see any other way we will survive. We need to order a village-wide slumber and have search parties sent out until water can be found or the rivers and falls flow again." Elder Lund adds.

"Will the search parties have enough water?" asks the Head Nurse.

"No, not if they don't find new water sources soon. But we will all die a lot sooner if we don't initiate a slumber. How long can a Dreamer go without water while in slumber?" Elder Lund asks the Head Nurse.

"It really depends on the person, but anywhere from a few months to a few decades."

"Then the choice seems clear." Elder Munyer says looking at the Head Nurse and Elder Lund. The Head Nurse reflects for a moment. She nods yes knowing it's the only option.

15

VILLAGE SLUMBER

Felsik is blabbering while Lilix adjusts his chair. Nurse Rina can hear him clearly while she prepares something at the mixture table.

"Does he have to keep making the same sound over and over? It is very distracting." nurse Rina asks irritated.

"Don't listen to her, just keep talking." Lilix says softly to Felsik, out of earshot of nurse Rina. Lilix retrieves some objects at the mixing table.

"Don't worry, thanks to the trade lock, he won't be making much sound when the mixture's benefits wear off." Lilix comments to nurse Rina.

"Good, and let me make it clear to you: if I see any illegal mixtures, plants, or medicines, I will report it immediately to the Captain of the Guard. I will not tolerate any illegal activity or outlawed substances in this hospital of any kind, no matter how beneficial they are to the patients. I simply will not tolerate it by anyone."

The Head Nurse is standing at the door.

"Isn't it time for your rounds?" she asks Rina. Rina walks by the Head Nurse and pauses at her looking coldly into her eyes. "By anyone." nurse Rina

threatens and exits.

"Why is she like that?! Sometimes I want to push her out of the window but I fear her blood would melt the street and pull everything into a black hole." Lilix vented to her mother.

"Window." Felsik states. The Head Nurse gets the dream drop machine from the medicine locker and fetches the patient registry.

"Well, you won't have to listen to her for a while: an order to slumber was voted on."

Lilix's attention focuses at the Head Nurse.

"Village slumber? Is there no other way? I didn't realize it was that bad."

The Head Nurse sees fear in Lilix.

"Don't be afraid. We fall asleep every night. This is no different."

"It's not the falling asleep part I am afraid of, it's the waking up part that has me worried. Have you ever had to slumber?"

"Mmhmm," the Head Nurse nods. "I was just a little girl."

"What was it like?" Lilix asks, hoping that her inquiry will mitigate some of her fears.

"The only thing I remember is the most peaceful feeling, when the drop hit my eye."

"How long was the order?"

"It was a week, but really just a blink of an eye. You're a deep dreamer, but a light sleeper. Don't worry, everything will be okay." They look at the registry. "I want you to administer drops to wards 1 through 4. Make sure all patients are safe from

falling out of bed." says the Head Nurse and makes sure the special dream drop machine works. She carefully looks at a drop as it fills a glass chamber and sees that it measures the correct amount. She then gives the drop machine to Lilix. "Make sure to only give one drop." her mother warns.

"What happens if more than one is given?"

"Nightmares happen, the worst you'll ever know. So be very careful." her mother answers and then exits the room. Lilix packs some items into a box at the mixture table.

"I really need to learn not to ask so many questions. My fault for asking." she says to herself.

.....

For the next few hours all the nurses administered drops to the patients in the hospital while messengers were sent to deliver the order of slumber to the village. A large village bell chimed the order alarm and every family administered the drops to their own. Soon the village was silent and motionless as dust. The Captain of the Guard locked the main gates and posted guards every two blocks. The village was mostly made of stone buildings but had the occasional old wood house or stucco-walled shop. The predominant architecture was a mixture of Victorian and "dream gothic." The village was

decorative in spots and very plain in others but always had a sweet inviting perfume in the air.

.....

Wanting to get the administration of the drops over with, nurse Rina is attempting to put Felsik into slumber. But he is uncomfortable with her harsh grips and makes her miss.

"Hold still you little broken bastard!" she ordered while violently holding his head in place. Lilix comes in and sees Felsik in nurse Rina's violent grip.

"DON'T TOUCH HIM!" Lilix commands as she quickly moves to save him. Nurse Rina lets go of Felsik.

"Fine, you do it." she states coldly as she leaves the room. Lilix gently examines his face for damage. His skin has red marks from the grip of nurse Rina's angry fingers. Lilix softly massages the marks away.

"I'm so sorry, I should have never, ever left you alone. Are you okay?" she asks Felsik. He responds with happy blinking eyes. He feels the weight of his world lighten every time Lilix enters the room. "The village has run out of water and now we have to sleep for a little while, but with all my heart I promise that I won't let you stay trapped in there forever." she softly rotates his head up and holds the dropper over his eye, but pauses when Felsik struggles to say a few

words.

"Th...tha...thaank. Youuu, Lil...Lilix."

Lilix holds back tears.

"You are very welcome." she states warmly. "Very welcome." she gathers her emotions with a long breath. "Okay, ready?" she asks. He blinks yes. A small, silvery drop finds his eye and he is pulled into a comfortable, unbound slumber.

.....

Moments later, Lilix returns to the main preparation room. Nurse Rina is sitting in one of three slumber chairs that have been set up for them.

"Okay, that's everyone." says Lilix.

"Almost everyone." Head Nurse replied.

"Who's left?" Lilix inquires.

"US!" answered nurse Rina sharply then continued to scold Lilix. "About time you're back. You are so slow. I can't wait to get away from this place for a while. This place always stinks!"

The Head Nurse is busy at the table preparing for slumber. She gestures to Lilix to administer drops to nurse Rina.

"Lilix, will you?"

Lilix puts her stuff down and prepares the drop machine.

"Hurry up... I can't fall asleep fast enough. And give

me two drops, I don't want to risk waking up if I hear someone fall out of their bed or cry for a nurse.." nurse Rina hissed at Lilix.

"But you shouldn't..." Lilix tries to warn but is cut off by nurse Rina.

"Please don't be a pain. I have been a nurse a lot longer than you...just give me two drops." she orders. Lilix looks at her mother.

"Give her what she asks for." the Head Nurse responds.

"Okay, you asked for it." Lilix gives nurse Rina the drops and she quickly falls unconscious. She comes over to the mixture table and puts the dropper down. Lilix looks her mother in the eye and they start sharing a tacit revenge for all the cruel actions of nurse Rina.

"She asked for it and I tried to warn her." Lilix states.

"Get comfortable." the Head Nurse gestures to a chair. Lilix sits and her mother comes over to her.

"Don't be nervous about the slumber." her mother says.

"It's not that. I'm worried about Felsik. It's unfair that we are putting him back to sleep just when he is starting to wake up." Lilix replies.

"I know. But he'll be free in his dreams. And then when we wake up again we will continue the treatments. Everything will work out."

The Head Nurse tilts Lilix's head back.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'll stay positive."

"Ready?" the Head Nurse asks.

"Yes." Lilix says.

"Beautiful dreams." Lilix's mother states.

"Beautiful dreams." Lilix responds. The Head Nurse drops the fluid into her eye. Lilix falls into slumber instantly. Her mother watches for a few seconds to make sure it worked fine. She then goes to a chair with a special dropper arm and self-administers a dream drop. She is quickly pulled under and into a slumber.

16

INTO DREAM

Torm is working at her lab while her sister sleeps. A knock comes at the door, wakes the sister and a scroll comes through a slot.

"Village order" a messenger's voice cries muffled through the door. Torm gets up and retrieves the scroll and reads it silently.

"What does it say?" asked Torm's sister. Surprised that her sister is awake, Torm looks at her in silence and then looks back at the note keeping her thought hidden. Torm retrieves a small vial of sleep root drops and makes her way to her sister's bedside.

"It's an order for a village-wide slumber." Torm replies. Her sister stares back at her thinking.

"For how long?"

"Until the Village Elders wake us."

"I'm afraid! How will we administer the mineral vapor?"

"No need to worry about that, I am not going to slumber. I'm going to keep working on our little fever puzzle."

"What if the Elders see that you're not in slumber? They could separate us."

"Let me worry about the Elders. Besides, I have a

feeling a slumber could be beneficial to fighting the fever."

"Please don't let me sleep forever."

"Never...lay back. Soon you'll feel the comfort of slumber."

Torm's sister lays back and prepares to receive an eye drop.

"I love you." they tell each other. Torm holds the dropper over her sister's eye and delivers one last promise,

"I won't let anything happen to you." then she releases the tear-shaped drop into the air, falling slowly into her sister's eye.

Her sister is pulled into a dream by an iris that morphs into a spinning machine whose arms fold into themselves as they create a perfect repeating spherical row of clones that rotate inwards pulling a stream of brilliant flashing flares through a long tunnel of ornate dreamcatcher frames finding their way to herself floating in a slow-motion cloth trailing out in every direction as she hovers blissfully in a deep sleep.

Torm sees that the drops have done their job by the way her sister breathes: slow, steady and long. Torm looks at the vapor machine next to her sister's bed and the dregs of water sitting on her lab table. Nurse Rina's voices rings in her ears: "Your only option is to get the water flowing or say goodbye to your sister." Torm stands still a moment deciding if it is

possible for her to do exactly that.

"Get the rivers flowing again?" she thinks to herself. That would mean she would have to do what no one has ever done: reach the top of the falls. She looks down at her sister with loving eyes. That was the moment she decided it was possible. She bursts into action. She moves some water tanks over to her sister's bedside and connects them to the vapor machine. There is enough water to make vapor for at least two months. Her sister will not need to eat or drink or worry about any other biological function because the slumber controls those needs. Torm fills her bag with tools and gear, throws on her journey cape and goes to her sister's bedside. Warmly stroking her sister's hair, she speaks to her.

"I won't let the rivers stay dry, dear little sister. I will be back with the waters and the cure."

Torm kisses her sister's forehead and then makes her way quietly out of their tiny house. Knowing that the Captain of the Guard is on constant watch, Torm knows that her sister will be safe but will prove to be a slight inconvenience since Torm would have to sneak out of Dreamer Village.

The large order bells has been replaced by a glowing one with a felt hammer whose tone softly indicates to the world that Dreamer Village is in slumber. She makes her way past the guards and soon finds herself at the river's edge. She sees a seeker party gathered at a large sign that points north and reads Great Falls. Torm suddenly feels a strong inscrutable pull from her instinct to go south, which

to her rational mind makes no sense, but Torm has learned that sometimes the opposite way of working can get the exact results you are looking for. So south she went.

17

BLACK FIELDS

In the faint light of the early sun, Avio makes good speed towards home. He has been trying to reach Bex for hours with no luck. "Bex, are you there? Pick up. I'm almost there. I'm almost home."

A large gust of air blows hard at his balloon and Avio almost drops his radio. His curiosity focuses in on a blurry swarm on the ground.

"What is that?" he asks himself while retrieving his looking glass. He sees herds of frightened animals running in terror. "What are you running from you silly animals?" he asks. He turns his glass to the golden field but has trouble locating it. All he sees is a lifeless black field. He cross-checks his reason against landmarks. "There's Catcher's Peak, or what is left of it." he says to himself seeing that it has been crusted over in black. "So that must be Golden Field." he confirms to himself. He desperately tries again, louder at his radio. "BEX! COME IN BEX! COME IN! ARE YOU OKAY? WHAT IS GOING ON DOWN THERE?"

A small faint signal breaks through on what is left of Bex's radio, but his friend is dead and unable to reply. 30 minutes go by before Avio is near the fields.

Using his looking glass, he seeks for Bex in the fields but only finds a mass of black near the spot he launched from. He descends to the spot and can now see a body which he concludes is his friend because of the steampunk guitar next to it. He tries to set the balloon down but is taken up by a sudden gust of strong wind and can't compete against its draft. He is forced to watch his friend's body become smaller through the eyes of his glass as he is kidnapped by the rising air.

18

IVAN THE EATER

Days have gone by since Torm set out on her journey to the Great Falls. For the last few hours she has been chasing a butterfly through the woods. Her hunt is fueled by the fact that the butterfly is the same type that caused a breakthrough in her experiments. She chases it from branch to branch as it leads her through a long trail. It occasionally rests its fuzzy wings on some sun-lit leaves and then picks up again when Torm gets near. Eventually Torm catches up to it in a small area of the woods peppered with tombstones. She softly walks up to the beautiful creature and holds her hand out gently. The butterfly seems less nervous, but still cautious. It takes a few minor, timid flights but then warms up to Torm. It lands on Torm's finger but then flies away quickly. Torm's excitement soon turns to confusion then to dizziness. She passes out. A cannibal gypsy, Ivan, with a unique red and black patterned face, unhides himself and the butterfly lands on his shoulder.

"Works every time." He brags in a heavy gypsy accent having used the butterfly's poison to knock Torm out. Moments later, Torm is unconscious and tied to a tree while Ivan prepares ingredients at a

small table in his open air kitchen. His favorite butterfly, Igor, sits on a little yellow lantern. Ivan sharpens a blade with a hand rod as he looks at his cook book and argues with the butterfly.

"What do you know about the world? You are so tiny, you barely in it!"

The butterfly flies off the lantern. "Oh I'm sorry, I apologize," he says sincerely. "but you think you know everything just because you eat so many books." Ivan sticks the sharpening rod into the dirt. The butterfly lands on an old skin-bound cook book. Ivan gets angry and shoos it away. "You are free to eat any book, notepad, or record. But if you ever eat Mama's cookbook, Ivan will eat *you*."

Out of view of Ivan, Torm comes out of unconsciousness. She looks around confused but quickly discovers her bad situation. She tries to get out of the ropes but can't seem to manage.

"HELP! SOMEONE HELP ME!" she yells, but the only one around that can hear her is Ivan and he's too caught up in his insanity to notice her cries for help.

"Wrong? What makes it wrong? How many four-legged creatures do you think she has made her meal? It would only be wrong if she didn't taste good." Ivan responds. He reads the ingredients from his cook book. He sees he needs a blood lemon. He puts down his knife and goes to a small tree next to his prep table which has a family of oddly-shaped lemons growing on it. "Let's see: Skinny Mother, Sick Father, Ugly Daughter, Healthy Brother." Ivan decides out loud. He picks "Healthy Brother" from

the tree and returns to his prep table. Butterflies surround a plate so he swaps them away with his hand. He cuts the lemons and squeezes blood juice into a bowl. Then from the chin of a skull, he picks big, ugly bear hairs. "Thanks Mama! Love you mama." he says patting the skull on its forehead. He then drops the hair into his mixing bowl. Next he puts on a special glove and picks an "Electric Root" out of a large clear jar. He continues arguing with his favorite butterfly. "Not natural? What's not natural? Ivan is part of nature. So anything Ivan does is natural. I think Igor confused on this." Ivan drops the root into the bowl and takes off his glove. The cook book now calls for Black Rose Petals. Ivan looks through his shelves but can't find any, so he settles on Black Rose Seeds. He continues his debate with Igor. "Don't blame me, Ivan didn't invent hunger. Life feeds on life. Something always has to die for something to live." Ivan opens the bottle of Black Rose Seeds and pokes a hole into a pot full of dirt, plants a few seeds and covers them over with dirt. He takes out a special glass magnifier, and directs a beam of light from the sun into the pot with the seeds and a black, bold, glowing rose grows from the dirt. "Ah perfect, beautiful." he states while picking a petal from the Black Rose while it's still wet with its glow. The final ingredient in the cook book shows a Heart. Ivan grabs a silver platter and knife. Igor intercepts him as he turns around to harvest Torm's heart. "What? You think you're so much better than Ivan because all you eat is nectar and books!" Ivan

pauses as if the butterfly was talking back. "Ahhhh!!! You are out of your mind! You eat my books and you have the nerve to tell me what I should eat! Books must I remind you come from people I eat! Ivan only eat their bodies but you eat their stories, their ideas, their dreams, the very flesh of their souls. That is real death. Ivan not so cold-hearted, but Ivan is very hungry. So out of way little butterfly, I need meat." Ivan pushes the butterfly out of his way and marches toward Torm. He hears music in his mind as he parts a sea of a million flapping butterflies. Seeing him coming, Torm panics and starts desperately moving her body trying to get out of the ropes. She freezes up and pulls her chin into her shoulder anticipating the blade as Ivan brings it close to her chest. She closes her eyes in fear and just before the blade can penetrate her chest she hears Ivan scream out in pain. In the corner of her eye she sees a bloody blade pulling out of Ivan and a unique vial around the neck of the man holding the blade. He walks his blade slowly to her. She closes her eyes again in fear, but feels the ropes on her hands cut free. Torm opens her eyes and sees the Old Man is gone. She immediately sheds the ropes and gathers her things. She notices the Old Man's vial in Ivan's dead hand. She quickly puts it with her things and runs into the forest looking for him.

19

FOREST OF DOUBT

Torm has been in the forest for hours and hasn't seen a sign of the Old Man who helped her. But just as she sits to rest, she sees a glimpse of his black cape. She chases after the glimpse.

"Hey! You dropped this." Torm yells holding up his vial. She feels a tickle in her hand. She stops and looks at the vial but drops it instantly when she notices she's holding a handful of maggots. Before she can make sense of the fistful of rotten vermin, she hears her sister's voice yell out from a distance.

"Torm! Help me Torm!" the voice of her sister pleads. Torm instantly focuses a serious attention on her sister's voice.

"Sister? Sister! Where are you, I'm coming!" She runs with all of her energy towards the direction of her sister's voice. She continues on the rocky path of the forest running past heavy-branched tree stumps and large exposed roots.

"TORM! HELP!" her sister's voice pleads again.

"I'm coming, sister! Hold on."

Torm makes her way up a small hill. She can hear the hungry sounds of large animals and footsteps stomping and cracking the forest floor. She gets to

the top of the hill and sees a pack of strange armless, two-legged, pregnant creatures eating at her sister. Torm rushes over the top and towards them with fury in her heart.

"GET AWAY!" Torm yells at the creatures with her largest voice. She grabs a large branch while running, intending to use it as a weapon on the creatures. Growing closer, her view of her sister becomes clearer, but when she gets into striking distance the chaos goes silent: the creatures and her sister are nothing more than a configuration of misleading branches and roots piled up and exposed. Torm drops the heavy branch in confusion. She runs back to her original path but can't find it. She slows down and looks for it, trying to keep from having panic set in. She looks for her footsteps to help find her way back but doesn't find any. Torm stops and makes a placemaker on the ground out of stones so she can tell if she is just walking in circles or making progress. She continues to do this every five minutes for the next two hours. She has yet to see her markers but slowly notices strange things in the woods: flapping wing sounds that fly by her ears, clicks and knocks echoing at random distances, flashes of light at the corner of her eyes, blooming shadow flowers, and random, unintelligible whispers, some of which turn into sharp cries of pain. The frequency and intensity of these strange things increases the deeper she goes. Soon the eerie strangeness works itself on her. Her thoughts turn doubtful. A low-pitched chanting drone of a sick didgeridoo mixes its tones

with a choir of guttural voices taking over the now ill-layered air of the forest.

Torm's voice forms a choir of angry, sad, screaming and whispering timbres all saying the same thing in unison:

"Don't think otherwise; She will die. You know you can't save her. She is already dead. The source of the waters will never be found and your sister will be consumed by Shadow Fever! Save her if you can. Don't let her die, Torm, try not to let her die. Look, there she is." Then the voices start reversing their timbres in a loop like the "sonic upturn" of a suspended cymbal. Torm becomes overwhelmed and closes her eyes hoping to eradicate the voices from her mind. The voices die but a cold sets into her body. She opens her eyes and is in a new dark forest. Trees with dozens of arms that curl in all directions but with perfect symmetry in their bilateral divisions. And though strange, they are not without their beauty.

Rotund, burly creatures walk by her on both sides but don't seem to care or notice that she is there. A behavior she takes great comfort in since the beasts look murder-hungry. She follows them for a while and is led to a tall, dark castle made of golden-burnt demon skin. Torm feels a strange desire to enter it. A feeling that contradicts the sight of people being brought into the castle against their will by the many different terrifying creatures. Some people locked in cages built on the backs of their monsters, some strangely fused to the creatures that carry them. She

imagines this is what happened to her sister. Torm has a flash of herself suddenly cutting open a monster's stomach with the intention of riding it into the castle incognito. But when she stands into the stomach and tries to steal its costume, the animal liquifies into slime and falls apart around her. The flash passes and Torm is relieved to find herself dry and without a desire to cut, but the desire to enter becomes stronger and she continues down the path. As she draws closer to the castle she feels a warm, disgusting air that kills the cold from the forest but nauseates her. She cautiously makes her way to a large set of double doors made of demon skin where two figures that are fused into the door greet her. She looks at the door, but a way to open it doesn't present itself clearly. Torm is overcome with nausea from the foul air and falls to her knees clutching her stomach with her hand. She looks up at the door and suddenly a solution flashes into her mind of how to open it: the pain in her belly is the key under the mat. She stands up slowly, pushing through the pain and penetrates one of the figure's stomachs with her hand where she finds a door chain. She pulls it. The large doors open slowly, revealing the head of a "Bone Flower Worm". She knows the only way in is letting the worm eat her. She slowly walks towards the mouth as it blooms open and swallows her. She walks through the worm's tunnel untouched as it rotates around her in another strange symmetry not without its beauty. Soon another mouth at the end of the tunnel opens up and she finds herself inside the

palace.

A row of biomechanical sewing machines line a path of a conveyor belt made of skin. Fetus sack bobbins feed thread through two-headed rod guides whose tails are necks and necks are tails. Needles eat the threads and push their heavy-willed purpose to the tip that penetrates the flesh of the conveyor belt walkway like hammers on meat. Torm can hear the rubbery skin stretching as the flesh is fed to the machines while blades cut off the excess skin as it forms into a long thin path. Bruises are sucked dry by large mosquitos and puss is sucked out of any infected skin by long-beaked "Puss-Suckers". Torm has a vision come to her mind when she touches some of the skin: a giant flow of bloody mud is frantic with people suffering from full-body scalping. Snowflakes of blood fall into the flow as their voices cry out like kids and making the most eerie, unnatural sounds. Torm is released from the vision when she stops touching the skin. She stands on the conveyor belt and rides it at the stitching speed it dictates. She smells a cologne of rotting meat and machine oil as the conveyor belt takes her past the large moving parts of the sewing machines. The moving flesh isle brings her to a web of pregnant nerves where machines gather embryos from fetus sacks. The embryos are ground into paste as their little souls escape but are immediately collected by a black iron cup. Her horror at the sight is muted by her desire to find her sister. She walks over the bridge of skin ignoring the suffering as best as her

kind heart will let her. Soon she finds herself on a narrow path with no referenceable walls to gauge distance, only a featureless black void that tests the accuracy of her equilibrium. Occasionally she passes a blooming "Blood Flower" that strangely makes her feel balanced. A while goes by before she comes to pillars made from the carcass of a Bone Flower Worm. They form a sort of rib cage around the path hugging it like a banister. The air tastes medically sweet. Not a pharmaceutical flavor, but more biologically sweet than anything. She avoids tasting it by breathing as little as possible but as the walk is long this proves difficult. Soon a film builds up in her mouth from the air and she is chewing chunks of the disturbing atmosphere. This foul tarter makes her teeth ache like a child who has had too much candy.

She reaches the end of the path and is met by a Boatman guarding a small channel dock. He has a large head shaped like a black starfish with a golden skull and oxygen mask. The way he stands obscures the true shape of his body, but suggests a dominating height. A set of "root teeth" hang from a wooden key box pole next to the Boatman. A series of dirty empty jars are on tube poles that connect to the Boatman's body. Their use was obvious to her: the root teeth are used to induce self-purging and fed to the jars.

"TORM! HELP ME!" her sister's voice suddenly pleads in the distance. Feeling a rush to help her sister, Torm eats a tooth and vomits in the jars of the Boatman. He accepts this payment and backs into

the water like a crab in retrograde, disappearing under for a moment then bringing up a platform. When Torm gets on the platform she is savagely held in place by organic spikes that penetrate her skin, finding their way into her organs. The spikes keep her organs from failing by sealing off any blood that could run away and by giving nutrients to their tissues. The Boatman's head forms the front of the boat deck and his long legs open up 15 feet under him. A water wheel reveals itself as his walk pulls everything forward. Under the narrow channel is a wall of white cloth figures vacuumed under framed sheets trying to free themselves. The channel opens up into a large river cave with worm bone rafters that are filled with tortured people. The bloody water of the river refuses to mix with the clear waters of the channel as the Boatman walks the platform into it. The river has a tar skin scabbing its surface and is full of frantic bodies desperately trying to get out of its creature-filled currents. Clusters of bodies have formed boats to swim away but are quickly eaten by tar worms.

Torm closes her eyes but a long organic machine arm whose fingertips are biomechanical wasps with sewing machine heads, stitch her eyes open. Torm feels no pain and for some reason this made sense to her. Torm sees her reflection in the river but doesn't recognize herself, just seeing a hallucinogenic caricature with a face pulling off like a melting candle.

Mechanical tape worms, made of metal and cloth,

patrol the air. Using their jaws made of sticky cloth and iron mesh they trap anyone trying to escape. She notices the strange walk of those on the banks of the river: a stop-go animation whose key frames randomly jump on its own timeline confusing any predictable position. They are eaten up by blooming reverse fabric traps, made into cocoons and then placed onto a drying line. The boat comes to the end of the river and docks. A machine pulls the threads out of her eyelids, a vomit mask refeeds her the currency from the Boatman's jars, and the spikes retreat from her organs and skin. They leave no marks and no pain was ever felt. Torm steps onto the dock and instantly her memory of the insane ride is erased.

Two rows of burnt-skinned demons line the side of the long dirty dock. Chains welded to their footless, shinless kneecaps anchor them to the ground keeping them from floating away to heaven. Torm walked this hall of demons until she met a hard, mean wall. Bones dig into the wall like rotting teeth on a dying animal and form a ladder higher than she is able to see. The valor to climb the wall was challenged by the brittle fickle bones that would break unannounced in her hands and under her feet. After two hours of climbing and nearly falling to her death a hundred times, the wall's fragile rungs ran out. Unable to climb up or down, she froze in panic on the wall with eyes squeezed shut. Her mind was blank as her body prayed for help. A rusty clanking from the darkness crawls in behind her. She opens

her eyes and sees two demons with chains coming out of their mouths and head locked upward, their bodies rigged together by pieces of flat iron. Before she could introduce herself to the bizarre situation of the chain eaters, the bones she stood upon broke. She went seeking safety in the arms of the two hanging demons. With no place to stand, they kept her from falling by penetrating her ribs with two humming bird beak-shaped rods. The rods penetrated her lungs and with every breath, the demons ate up six feet of chain. Torm would need to keep breathing to climb. She manages 56 breaths before becoming uncontrollably light-headed. A large metal and cloth lionfish silently floats in behind her offering reprieve in its long, cloth tongue wrapping her up with reverse fabrics.

20

GUILT

Torm is unconscious and shackled in a circular iron cage floating in black. Chains connect to every iron arm and are held by demons standing on bases at the outer perimeter of the floating jail. Torm is suddenly awakened by the sound of her sister's cries.

"Help...Torm...the pain!!!"

Her sister is being carried through tunnels by large demons on track and rail.

"Hold on sister, I'm coming!" Torm yells, struggling to get out of her shackles.

"Torm stops struggling when she sees a large cage ascending from the black. When the cage reaches Torm's level, the irons open up revealing Torm as a queen. She has white cracking skin and a golden face crown with diamonds covering the top and thin chains hanging from it. Her dress is cut like a cage with gold plates holding white flat rows that are pinned together by golden pyramidal spikes. Golden metal rib tubes hang off her matching corset while a white flowing back piece is held up by thin golden rods that fan out like a blooming peacock. The queen steps onto a platform that is carried down an aisle of smoke that is carved like marble as it forms into

complex fractals. The imperial row is walled by tall cage columns of iron and stone that lead directly to Torm's floating prison. The queen is an emotional avatar that was built from suppression to cope with hidden feelings of guilt but is now here delivered to speak:

"Torm and sister, shadow and river. So close to a cure, but yet you are blind to it. Why, Torm? Why leave your sister in pain?"

"The rivers stopped flowing. I can't make the mineral vapor without it. I had to leave to get the waters flowing again." Torm explains.

"You have come far to try to hide from yourself. You wear tears on your face, but inside a smile as dry as the river."

"I'm not trying to hide...I'm trying to save my sister. I love her more than anything. Where's my sister?" Torm pleads. The queen goes to the center and controls the smoke to show an image of her sister hovering in a white dress.

"Sweet little sister, innocent little sister. Lie dying in a dream. The dark embrace of the veins in a cold corner of a shadow."

Translucent metallic souls of her sister fly out from thin air and swim past Torm as they cry for help.

"Save me...don't leave me here to die!"

"Why do you block the whispering joy while working on her fever? You can save her! What are you afraid to see, Torm?" the queen asks Torm.

"I'm scared my curiosity will outweigh my love." Torm admits.

"And that is why she still has the fever! But you can save her Torm!"

"How?" Torm pries.

"Your cage is made of guilt. Let go and you are free."

"Why should I feel any joy in something that gives my sister so much pain? I shouldn't feel any pleasure at all."

"It is the joy of the puzzle you possess, not her pain. Let go of your guilt and save your sister."

"Why did you leave me behind to die, Torm?" sister's voice cries out.

"No sister I didn't leave you to die...I'm trying to get the rivers flowing again. We just need more time. I would never hurt you sister!"

Torm sees her sister floating in white cloth as a large machine closes from both sides. "Please stop the machines, the veins will kill her!" Torm pleads to the queen.

"Let go of your guilt and save your sister."

The metallic souls continue to swim past Torm and cry for help.

"I'm trying... but her cries are too loud!" Torm exclaims.

"Let the gears of your curiosity drown her cries and focus on the fever." the queen orders. Torm closes her eyes and moves her focus to the gears of the giant machine trying to ignore the cries of her sister. Chemical formulas and lab procedures fill Torm's mind and begin to compete directly with her sister's cries.

..... **"Torm save me, ...** Four mm of
 cr_3=45* **Don't leave me here to die"..**
"Torm save me,.. Four mm of
 cr_3=45* **Don't leave me here to die".**
"Torm save me, Four mm of
cr_3=45* **Don't leave me here to**
 die".

Soon Torm has focused the energy of her mind on her curiosity but the giant machine is too close to stop.

"TOOOOOOOOORRRRRMMMMM!" her sister yells out while her face sinks in with death as the machine closes around her.

.....

Torm opens her eyes and lets go of her guilt. The demons that surround her cage are destroyed by angels that manifest from thin air: with only a touch

of light the demons disintegrate. This releases their hold on the cage chains and Torm is set free from her shackles. The cage transforms into a new configuration and Torm sees chemical formulas and complex smoke patterns floating in air in the space around her. Now guiltless and unbound, she is free to work on a cure. The large machine encompassing Torm's sister opens up to reveal a biomechanical sister covered in mechanical tubes which completes their hook up as the machine backs away. A workstation rises to Torm. At the center is a set of large glass beakers filled with water and held in place by a frame of brass. Next to that is a table of chemicals and solutions, some breathing on open air plates and some held in bottles of various sizes. To the very right is a knob-controlled book box with a glass plate top and an old coffee colored book laying open inside. To the far left is a heart lung machine made of dirty gold metal, rusty metal parts and rotting wood.

Torm takes some solutions from the chemical table and pours them into the water. They explode like an upside-down firework forming into branches of ink, each chemical mixing and combining branches as they form a new compound. The liquid combinations find their way to a feeding tube at the bottom of the glass beaker and travel through long glass tubes directly to her sister. The mixture causes black veins to grow on a large sphere at the base of her sister, indicating a negative response.

The heart lung machine struggles aggressively as

her sister's body fights the liquid compound. Torm immediately flushes the solution by turning brass knobs that drain the beakers. The veins stop growing and the lung machine settles down. Torm tries another combination but it has a worse response and the veins grow much larger. She flushes the beakers once again but the veins keep growing. She panics. Needing answers, she flips the pages of the box and finds a citation about large "tar mosquito". She activates a button connected to its page and a cage forms around her sister whose walls only allow Torm to see silhouettes. Another arm connects to the cage and the silhouette of a large mosquito comes out. It flies around randomly then lands on her sister's head. It penetrates her skull with a long needle nose and starts to suck fluid from her brain. The vein sphere grows smaller. When finished with its meal, the mosquito falls to the floor melting into tar as it slips through the grating. Not wanting to randomly pick which chemicals to use, Torm studies the book box for suggestions. She turns past many pages filled with illustrations and graphics of medical procedures until she finds a page with the Professor displayed on it. She activates it hoping he will be able to provide an educated solution. An arm deck brings out a golden steampunked Professor standing in a lab of dirty glass and metal and the profile of the deck is in the shape of a cranium. Chemical formulas hover in holograms as he pours chemicals into glass beakers. His voice is unfamiliar to Torm and backwards:

"Mrot reh evas. Eruc eht evah tsomla uoy. Mrot reh

evas." Tubes connect to his lab and feed his solutions to Torm's sister. Her sister's condition worsens and the sphere veins grow. Torm desperately turns back to the book box for answers. She finds a page with the Head Nurse displayed on it and quickly activates it. The nurse is brought out on a lab deck in the shape of a heart. She is dressed in garbles of metal and rented cloths. Tubes hook to her lab and she also gives chemicals to beakers of glass that connect to Torm's sister. The sphere veins double in size from the nurse's dose.

Torm starts pouring random solutions from the chemical table hoping to counteract the damage caused by the Professor and the nurse. But like a devil's fugue: problem builds upon problem developing a subject of chaos. She tries all the chemicals but nothing seems to work. The sphere veins sprout faces of her sister that cry in pain as they grow out in all directions from the center. The water in the beakers become a black tar creating thick black smoke that pours out filling the room with a tornado of swimming demons. Torm closes her eyes to this nightmare as her sister's biomechanical body slowly decays. Guilt refreshed, Torm's shackles return and the chain-holding demons regain the previous employment. Torm is encircled by figures of her sister in pain who cry out in suffering as demons attack them. Torm closes her eyes.

"This isn't real. My sister is safe and shielded in the power of a dream. NO! This isn't real, this isn't real." The tornado of suffering grows thicker.

"My sister is safe...my sister is safe...my sister is safe and shielded in the power of a dream.... My sister is safe and shielded in the power of a dream!!!"
Torm feels a warmth on her cheek and the tornado of pain clears.

21

GARDEN OF SOULS

Torm opens her eyes to a comforting warm atmosphere surrounded by beautiful trees on decks. Whispers of her own voice echo softly in the distance:

“My sister is safe and shielded in the power of a dream.” The echoes turn into a noise of unintelligible loops that are comforting. Soft obscure structures break through the magical orange mist, hinting at an architecture with their blurry silhouettes. Specs of light swim in the distance whose colors create a safe inscrutable company.

Torm walks the deck coming to a tree with human-sized pods and a pole with a small cage on it. As she comes closer to inspect the cage, a small Faerie emerges and gestures to come closer. The Faerie holds out its hand and when Torm touches it, a strong energy grips her body, triggering a memory of her sister:

.....

Philosophers

.....

Torm and her sister are on "Catcher's Peak" talking. Her sister is looking through a telescope at the villages and towns while Torm looks through a pair of golden glasses.

"What exactly are you looking for? What do you hope to find?" Torm asks her sister. She puts down the glasses and makes some markings in a book.

"I might ask you the same." her sister responds.

"Knowledge. I want to know how the world works." Torm puts the pair of glasses back up to her eyes.

"Well, it seems to me the best way to do that is to go into the world. Don't you ever want to travel? Go out and see new things, meet new people? I always think about it."

"Are you getting sick of me already, little sister?"

"Hardly, there's just so much out there I want to see." Sister looks through the looking glass into Lianka. "The Spas of Lianka, with their warm spring waters."

"The water is made warm by giant Lianka worm gas." Torm declares. Sister puts down the looking glass.

"What? That's not true."

"I swear it's the truth."

"Are you telling me that I would be enjoying a

blissful bath filled with watery worm farts?”

They both start to laugh.

“Gross, huh?”

“Yeah that’s gross... nevermind. For the future: sometimes, I just don't want to know.”

“Sorry, I'll try better not to ruin your daydreams.”

Sister looks again through the looking glass. She sees Goldlake and North Tolla.

“I hear the beaches of Goldlake shine golden red in the daytime and firey blue at night. And I would love to visit the honey pools of North Tolla and taste the gooey goodness.” “The beaches are glass deposits left by the digested passings of the sea flies and the pools are regurgitated sugar yak's meal.”

Sister puts down the looking glass.

“Torm! What did I just say?”

“Sorry, I just thought you should know what these places have in store for you.”

“Is there any place that isn't covered in dung, vomit, or farts?”

“Yes...”

Torm gets up and shares the looking glass with her sister. “The gardens of trees by Castle Path... the trees bloom everyday and fall everyday. The ancient villages of Ripa Nuonka, where the glass flutes and recorders are made. Or the great Sky Harbors of the Falls, with giant Legacy Ships that fit multiple generations of families. And I hear there are strange animals in the Giant Forest to the north.”

Torm sits down and her sister gets up and wanders around the perimeter of Catcher’s Peak, occasionally

looking back at her sister.

“Don't you ever want to go to those places, go beyond our little village and out of these woods? Discover new sounds, new tastes, new ways of thinking?”

“But I have so much to discover right here. The things I learn and see in our little inch of dirt offers infinite worlds for me to explore.”

Just as Torm finishes her sentence, her sister trips and grabs onto Torm to keep from falling.

“There is a lot of different dirt in the world. Could you imagine all the knowledge you could gain from talking to the wisemen?” Sister puts the looking glass down and moves to Torm. “Inventors, doctors, professors, and all the other ‘smartie darters’ out in the world. Just think of all the things you could teach them.”

Torm has a quick glimpse of interest that makes her smile.

“I saw that! I saw that smile. The thought of all that raw, juicy knowledge gives you a step forward that you can't hold back. Don't deny it.”

“I don't deny it. Meeting people who can add to my understanding of this world is very tempting. But it's also very dangerous.”

“Ugh, don't do that! Don't throw a wrench into your own machine. Everything is dangerous if you look at it close enough. Sometimes I think it's better to be sorry than safe! I don't think we are put into this world to stay, so we have to enjoy what it has to offer while we are still here. Not all of us have a talent to

see the infinite worlds that exist one inch beneath our feet. Most of us need to travel..." Sister moves to Torm "...in order to see as much as you see in a single glance. I think sometimes you forget that Torm. What are these by the way?"

Sister takes possession of a pair of "star glasses" from Torm's hand and tries them on.

"They are glasses I made to allow me to see the stars in the daytime. I forget what?"

Sister enjoys the view through the star glasses

"Oh, wow!"

"What do I forget?"

Her sister gives Torm a soft look.

"That you are unique in this world, Torm." Sister holds up the glasses to make Torm aware of them.

"You are meant for things so much bigger than our little village has to offer. Help the rest of the world see the lights above the skies."

.....

Torm comes out of the memory light-headed and falls to her knees. The strong energy that triggered the memory fades away and she takes a moment to recover. She looks for the Faerie, but finds only a reflection communicating with the corner of her eye. She picks herself up and follows the reflection to her bag and sees her glasses.

"Lights in the skies..." her sister's voice echoes in her mind. Torm takes her glasses out of her bag and slowly holds them up to her eyes and with one simple glance, a secret world is revealed to her. A world of light in a garden of souls filled with crowned spirits in flowing cloth, large beautiful animals made of glowing translucent skin and ornate iron. Beautiful pathways, bridges, decks, and stonework lined with lanterns and rock lights. Glitterfalls slowly dance downward from high rock columns into steams of gold. Hypnotizing plants, magical flowers of trance and ancient trees thriving on a meal of light. A supernatural agriculture hugging the architecture of heaven illuminating the energy of life, a place where even ideas have souls.

Torm lets down the glasses and finds that she doesn't need them anymore. The world is now visible to her naked eye. The Faerie reappears and reveals a new pathway. Torm picks up her bag and makes way to her four-winged guide. As Torm follows the Faerie on the path, she is surrounded by soft voices, whispers and calming noises that create a warm tingling feeling in the back of her head. Torm had read about a phenomenon known as ASMR, but never understood it until that perfectly peaceful moment where she felt soft pins and warm tingles in her skin. And after a little while walking in this beautiful atmosphere, Torm becomes aware of another strange but wonderful thing about this Garden of Souls: she isn't hungry or thirsty. Somehow this place brings peace to her body as well

as her mind.

Soon her Faerie guide disappears into the waters of a tree fountain. Torm stops and looks at the small pool of water at the base of the tree. Stems of water grow out of the pool and form into flowers whose petals silently explode into tiny wispy jellyfish that swim around her with deliberate elegance and mystical charm. In the middle of their mid-air dance, a reflection of Torm's mother inserts itself into her view from a tree knot water mirror.

"Toooooorm..." her mother's voice calls out. Torm quickly turns around seeking the voice she hadn't heard since she was a child, but only finds the little Faerie gesturing to a new link in the path. Torm quickly makes feet on the new pathway, hoping to find her mother.

"Mother! Mother...where are you?" Torm calls out desperately but finds only the sound of thin air as a response. Torm's pursuit loses tempo, falling to a slow questioning drip when she sees a light at the end of the path.

Golden red leaves fall all around her with a perfect placement of randomness as she walks down the tree-walled deck isle. Large human-sized pods with ornate glass hang from the trees, not a natural decorative fruit but a capsule constructed for a very real use. The clarity and resolution of the light becomes more recognizable as she draws closer to the center at the end of the path. The obscure light grows into an ornately patterned, translucent Child of Light. Unsure what to do, Torm stops and holds

perfectly still. The beautiful spirit child is facing the center with its back to Torm. The floor of the deck is blanketed with an intricate carving extruding upward of which you might find decorating the ceiling above a ballroom chandelier. Several evenly-spaced regal wooden rods hold crystals like candlesticks a few feet above a crystal grid laid out on the floor. An ancient urn lay at the base of the centered main tree whose trunk houses glass spheres framed like windows.

The Child of Light arranges some of the stones on a candlestick podium. Small spirits wisp out of the crystals forming a frequency pattern as they make their way into the urn. The energy keeps flowing, but the pattern changes as the Child of Light tunes the crystals. The spheres in the tree start glowing and the pods light from within. Small embers fall from the branches and grow into beautiful flowers as they make contact with the floor. Torm sees souls forming in the pods beautifully: Softly colored spirits with flowers growing out of their backs. As they reach full size, the grid and spirits dim away in unison. Torm relaxes and goes in half curious, half in awe, moving closer for a better look. She sees a variety of stone side by side on a podium. She looks around like a guilty kid checking if the coast is clear and then picks up a rectangular stone. The detail on the stone is impressive, deep carvings on the stones too precise to be done by earthly hands. Torm's flesh turns to energy and she finds herself standing in a court of light where a child of light bestows gifts to a line of

spirits from a throne of marble. One by one, the spirits receive their gifts and then float away into thin air. Soon the Child of Light focuses her attentions on Torm. She spoke directly to Torm's mind in a spirit language that she somehow understood:

"Brabbi Drem Fa Nakten" ("Welcome Torm.")

"What is this place?" Torm thought to herself and was surprised when the Child of Light answered:

"Yojya mo 'Evenoight' gramtep u sil. Ta narukma eroli te zer drem. Ta hokum bara de kal dra son o mal. Li forn neut con fora. Lihi kean fey sor mi ut let mayoon sortlem eef orn fea." ("This is 'Evenoight', a Garden of Souls. You will find peace from the shadows here. You have a strong heart to have come through the Forest of Doubt. Your love is strong for your sister. We would like to help you on your mission of love.")

The Child of Light raises her arms and two crowned spirits manifest themselves at Torm's sides. And with a whisper from the "Evenoight Mistress", Torm is a passenger on a crystal-powered iron transport of souls. High above the large garden valley, it passes other crystal-powered ships as it makes its way to an unknown harbor. As Torm watched its gears of metal and light turn she realized that a soul is placed into every machine by its function and that every time she used one of the machines she had built, she was seeing it live. Soon she could see a mountainside glowing with lights and a dock in the horizon, hanging high from a canyon wall. As the transport pulls to the dock, her "two-ghost entourage" usher

her to a pier and then vanish upwards into thin air. The ship starts to dissolve, so Torm quickly jumps to the dock before she is left without a place to stand. Her glowing skin returns to its normal state when her feet touch the wood of the dock.

A long, wooden-decked path covered in light bulbs and fenced with trees leads up the mountainside. Having no other direction that doesn't involve climbing steep rocks or jumping great depths, she takes the path as her only logical option. The light bulbs increase in number as they climb to the top. She feels the glow of their light in pockets of soft wind as she makes her way up the trail. She notes the countless variety of shapes the bulbs possess: some are simple spheres, others in the shape of cubes stacked like candy sticks and many with shapes too complex to describe. Some bulbs are held up in small wooden blocks, some are attached to sockets that grow out of the tree branches, and others clustered like cattails. She comes to an open area of a deck covered with bulbs in every direction. Examining them closer, she notices that some of the filaments are in the shape of people, some are in the shape of animals, some in flowers, great sea ships, and everything else you can imagine. Her curiosity began to ask questions she couldn't answer such as: "Why are they shaped like this?", "What powers the lights?" and "What's their use?"

Then suddenly she sees a bulb grow: Weaving threads of glowing orange form a net from a socket stem cooling into rainbow clear glass, shaped like a

balloon. The filament grows into the shape of a woman, whose body shines bright like a hot charge of iron. But Torm's attention is stolen away by an unlit bulb whose filament is in the shape of her mother. Torm quickly but gently takes possession of the cold, cracked bulb and wraps it in a cloth. She immediately thinks about her father. She starts looking for him through all the bulbs. She concluded that if her mother was an unlit bulb, there was a good chance her father was also. She ran up the trail looking at every unlit bulb. She knew that if he was lit that she would have to start all over but it was better to eliminate the unlit ones first to confirm it. The thought crossed her mind that the unlit bulbs might mean a status of death but since the bulb was only cracked that maybe a chance to bring the bulb to life was possible if it could be repaired. As her search grows closer to the top of the trail, she hears a giant sound coming from over its peak. She follows the sound to the top and is led to an overlook deck where her knees shake at the sight of a massive constellation harbor, anchored to the tops of the valley mountains. She can feel the sound of its enormous iron axles turning the gears of hundreds of large metal planet models as they orbit holographic, map-patterned suns.

A mountain of sand on the valley floor feeds giant molten tanks of glass. The celestial lava pours into "rodways" and pipes that lead to an unending library of bulbs on the canyon terraces whose shelves index the light of every soul ever made. She shakes the

shakes out of her knees and presses on the search for her father's bulb. She makes her way down the canyon trail and returns to her method of seeking unlit bulbs. As she descends the wooden-decked trails, bulbs grow in all around her. Torm looks for some kind of order to the bulbs, some kind of system of organization in this library of heaven. "But how do you alphabetize a soul before it has a name?" she thought to herself. Soon the aleatory became deliberate when she discovered a familiar ratio in their growth patterns: It was the Harmonic Series. Something she knew well from her love of music. Torm gently taps the nearest bulb and listens to its tone. It gives off a frequency of 342.076Hz. Torm's perfect pitch was so sensitive that she could detect the slightest frequency change up to 1,000th of a cent. She taps her mother's bulb and finds a tone at 440.011Hz. She sang the note and the sympathy tones of the bulbs that corresponded enhanced in brightness. With this simple system she calculates that her father's bulb will be eleven decks down and eleven bulbs in from her current location. She counts the rows carefully, not wanting to make an error in her equation. When she arrives at the location she finds an unlit bulb with a cold silverly filament in the shape of her father. Its surface has a crack like her mother's bulb. She carefully takes possession of it. When she holds the bulb up to her mother's, a dim spark of light starts to glow in both of them. Torm's heart beats faster and the awe takes her breath away. This small glow sunsparked Torm's hope. She had to

find a way to repair the glass. Torm knows she can't steal the glass from a growing bulb because that might be stealing someone's soul. Torm observed that when excess glass falls from some of the brighter bulbs, it returns to being sand when it hits the ground. "If I can catch it before it hits the ground, then I can use it to fix my parent's glass." Torm thinks to herself.

She follows the pattern of growth and waits for a bulb to grow. She warms the glass of her parent's bulbs in her hands so the heat of the falling glass doesn't make their cold surfaces crack more. But when Torm tries to catch the falling molten glass with her parent's bulbs it just slides off. She tries this a dozen more times with a dozen different bulbs but gets the same futile results. Every soul has its own type of glass and only glass made for her parents would repair their surface. Torm looks up to the constellation harbor and deduces that is her only chance of repairing the bulbs. It takes her over four hours to make her way through the maze of trails to the main pier of the harbor. The height makes her a bit stiff and nervous. She takes a breath and then takes a step onto the soulglass pier. She follows the long walk to the center where a soul in the shape of a sea captain is tending a large ship wheel that controls the operation of the harbor machine. In his eyes lay the coordinates of the universe and more directions than god.

Behind him, streams of soul energy pour from the tips of a spherical iron cage and are weaved with

molten threads of sand creating “soulglass”. She felt a mixture of intrusion and selfishness to ask for any help from this captain since he was responsible for so many souls. "Who am I to prevent the wheels of creation for the mending of two little bulbs?" Torm thought to herself. She always felt that the world didn't depend on her existence and that it would go on just fine without her. This wasn't a thought of self-pity but rather a virtue of honest modesty, understanding that she was lucky to have the world more than the world was lucky to have her. But in this moment of love for her parents and a need to have just a little part of them back in her life led her to momentarily abandon her honest modesty and ask for a selfish favor. The spirit wasn't bothered or even inconvenienced by her presence, quite the opposite. He knew Torm's purpose for being there at that moment and that exact time. Before she could say a word, two socket rods in a base of molten sand positioned themselves in front of her. Torm put the bulbs into the sockets and the cracks were mended and her parents figures glowed brightly. Torm took the bulbs out but they turned to sand in her hands, leaving her holding a golden framed compass. Torm took one step and the entire harbor shattered and a flash of light stole her conscious mind.

22

TOOLS

Torm is unconscious on the forest floor, at the same place she passed out from the butterfly's touch. She soon regains consciousness and finds the butterfly still lingering, almost as if it was concerned for her. She flexes her eyes open and blinks hard a few times to clear any blurry vision. She slowly pulls herself up and gains her balance with a few missed steps. She has no memory past chasing the butterfly and no memory of passing out. A warmth radiates from her pocket where she discovers the compass from the Legacy Harbor and the stone from the crystal grid deck. The compass shows an image of three tall stone pillars in the middle of a mountain valley. The compass is a small, rectangular golden frame, ornately designed with a small jewel held at the top by a floral carving. The image itself appeared to be created by an electro-chemical process, but when Torm examined the compass she was confused when she couldn't find its power source.

"There has to be a rational explanation of how it is powered, possibly the frame itself draws energy from light like a solar panel...Or perhaps its powered by atmospheric pressure..." she thought to herself. She

ran her hand over the compass trying to find an edge of a compartment that would hold a battery, but a painful glass sliver deterred her investigation and she was left nursing a sore thumb with her teeth. Her attention went back to the image. The location of the place in the image looked vaguely like a place she read about called the Eklipse Stones, which was about two day's walk from where she was at. The Eklipse Stones are heavy with folklore and thick with superstition. It is believed by some that the stones collect energy from the moon during an eclipse and use it to power the afterlife. Others believe the stones are a gateway to past lives. Some even believe that gods called "Eklipse Masters" live in them and are responsible for all reincarnations and universal knowledge. Torm took the lore with a skeptical secular eye and didn't believe magical gods placed the stones there for some mystical purpose, but rather a primitive ancient society must have put them there simply for ritual and worship. But the belief that the stones possessed no magical energy was challenged by the mysteriously powered compass in her hand and the questions piling up in her mind: "How does the compass get its energy?...How did I come to possess the compass?" and the most inscrutable question of all: "Why am I compelled beyond curiosity to find the place in the compass's image?" She examined the stone hoping that it could give her some answers.

The surface of the stone was a theatre of ancient ceremonies carved into a white jade, like a three-

dimensional photograph baked in coral. The carvings went so deep into the surface that its full details couldn't be seen with the naked eye. She didn't recognize any of the carvings with certainty and was left with more questions than answers. And though her curiosity naturally pulled her to know more about the mystery of the compass and stone, something deeper compelled her to follow these stranger's gifts, something she felt had to do with her sister. So she set out with more faith than reason to find the place shown by the compass.

Unknown to Torm, the combination of slumber and mineral vapor has suppressed her sister's Shadow Fever veins intensely and are only faintly visible. But a crack has developed in her sister's vapor machine from continuous use and if it grows any larger, the vapor will run out before Torm has a chance to return.

23

UNIVERSITY CIRCLE

After many days of traveling on foot, the Professor is finally in University Circle. But what he finds waiting for him sends lightning bolts up his spine: The university has been taken by the black crust of death. Random mounds and piles of black cover the once green, lush area of the campus courtyard. He inspects one closer and realizes the piles are the remains of students who had been rushed to their death suddenly and without prejudice. He quickly makes his way into the university, careful not to touch the crust. The Professor was unaware that his exposure to the mineral vapor created a low-level resistance to the crust, confusing it to think it had already grown on him. But if his pace didn't hasten, the crust would correct its error and kill him as well.

He was resolved to find what he came for: water. He rushes past the many doors of the school's halls until he reaches his friend's classroom. He allows himself a brief moment before opening the door to think there is a chance that somehow his friend survived this monstrous attack. But when he opens the door, all his hopes lay in a small black pile on the floor next to the chalkboard. He respectfully walks to

the mound, gently scraping away the crust with his foot until he finds a class ring marked with his friend's initials. This was enough to confirm that his friend was dead.

The feeling of danger hits him and his resolution is replaced by the reasonable sounds of a thousand growling lions of fear. With tunnel vision, his exit from the university is as immediate as he can make it, not bothering to look for anyone else or the water that he came for. He knew nothing would be found alive and kept running for hours as far as he could from the fate of this university.

24

STORM ENGINE

High in the clouds, a "Storm Engine" is hovering. The ship is a floating island of rusty pipes that stays afloat by converting the atmosphere into a nesting cradle of clouds. The Storm Engine is the property of the Gold Mother, a woman whose body is cut off at the waist and attached to a well-equipped hovering machine.

Hundreds of gold-leathered Steampunk Pirates wait in line to have their finds weighed by the Gold Mother. One by one, they place their items on a scale fixed to the Mother's floating platform.

"50 rations and 10 gallons 'Muti' drink." the Gold Mother orders as payment for a mechanical tool, a jar full of golden beetles, and a shiny gold iguana. The Mother collects the items into a safe place and puts the iguana on her shoulder. The pirate steps away and the next steps up and puts a gold-plated lead bar onto the scale, which he hopes will fool the Mother into payment. The Mother counterweights the bar and at first is happy to have such a heavy find. But she can smell the lead in the bar. She keeps her anger hidden and moves to the pirate with a smile. The pirate thinks he has completed the fraud and will

soon get payment. The Mother comes close and violently disintegrates the pirate with two large electric rods. She then calmly floats back to her original position. She gestures for the next pirate to come forward. The pirate is nervous his find won't please the Mother and he will suffer the same death, but he is too afraid not to obey and moves forward and places his bag on the scale. It is very light and the Mother has to take off the counterweights. She looks in the bag expecting another trick, but sees a parcel of blue jewels. She takes one out and inspects it with a machine connected to one of the hover engine arms.

"Blue Akline Crystal." the Gold Mother mumbles to herself. She looks at the pirate coldly for five seconds and then puts a sample into a projector index slide machine to identify it. Seconds later the machine matches it to a picture of a jewel-skinned man.

"Where did you find this?" the Gold Mother asks.

"Sand hills in the West Desert." the nervous pirate replies. The Gold Mother cancels the daily weighings and orders to change her ship's direction for the West Desert.. The men break lines and quickly move at her command. The Mother smiles at the pirate like a master pleased with his dog.

"1,000 rations and 500 gallons 'Muti' drink." the Gold Mother orders for the nervous pirate as the giant ship is pushed to full-grip, with a rumble like the breath of god.

25

EKLIPSE

Torm made her way through many dry brooks, valleys, trails, and paths on the way to the Eklipse Stones. The trek was mostly undeveloped country passing the occasional tiny wood shack or old stone cabin, which were all peacefully abandoned. A very lonely walk with only her purpose for company. After two days on foot, Torm finally reaches the Valley of the Eklipse where the Eklipse Stones stand. The compass is silent so she can't compare its image with the view she has from the valley base, but she is more than certain this is the location it meant to bring her to.

She examines the markings on the Eklipse Stones and finds that they are the same as on the Crystal Grid Stone. There are three Eklipse Stones each towering eleven feet tall and four feet thick. She notices the middle stone has circular slots, the left one has triangular slots, and the right one has cubular slots. "Was the Crystal Grid Stone designed to be placed in one of these slots?" she thought to herself. She takes the Crystal Grid Stone out of her bag and fits it into one of the cubular slots. "Whatever I'm supposed to do can't really be that easy... can it?" she

thinks to herself half-sarcastically, half-cautiously. Torm hears a locking sound from within the large Ekliipse Stone as the Crystal Grid Stone is pulled in halfway. She stands back expecting something big to happen but nothing does. She waits a few more minutes but nothing else moves. She tries to retrieve the Crystal Grid Stone but it won't release. She stops pulling it in fear she might break it. "Great, Torm! How do you screw up something so easy?" she scolds herself.

Although an hour has gone by, Torm hasn't wasted any time in studying the stones. She has papers all around her of rubbings and drawings of the Ekliipse Stones that she is trying to put together as if they were puzzle pieces. Right in the middle of her explication, a sudden rush of wind comes and blows them all away. She chases after the frantic, flying parchments. Fifteen minutes go by before she returns with all the papers. When she finally looks at them, she is stunned to find they are all blank. Torm was a bit frightened by this since she could find no rational explanation to how they were erased so cleanly and completely. Her scientific mind was being jolted by the unexplainable in her hands. She just sat in the circle of the stones, too afraid to make any efforts out fear of what phenomena she might trigger next. But her fear was outweighed by her instinct to save her sister, leaving her too scared to leave this place without an answer.

Soon night takes over the ceiling of the sky and Torm finds it impossible to fight sleep.

As soon as she closes her eyes, the Crystal Grid Stone activates and finds its way into the large Eklipse Stone. Lights trace the symbols on the stones and follows a path into the center where Torm is asleep. Torm is pulled out of slumber by the cracking lights and rumble of the stones. As the base rises 50 feet in the air, Torm quickly makes her way to her feet and stands in awe. The large Eklipse Stones multiply and transform into large circular patterns surrounding her. Three eclipsing suns reveal three giant Eklipse Masters sitting in the sky. Torm stands in the courtyard of their light as they order seven Pillar Masters to pull the “Levers of Reincarnation”. A symmetrical circular pattern of mystically illuminated stargaze lily petals converge at the center of the court and are reincarnated as three translucent phoenixes who disappear mid-flight into thin air. The energy in the Eklipse Masters builds and the levers are pulled again. A system of apple tree branches grow to the center of the “Court of the Eklipse” and are reincarnated as different animals of the sea. They all swim in different directions as their lights faint into the sky. A matrix of stones rise to Torm and reveal an ancient lever. The Eklipse Masters change the color of their light and shifted their sitting positions. Torm pulls the lever and symbols of an ancient language float into the courtyard of light then are reincarnated into “Seven Architects of the Universe” who escape into the colors of the sky.

The Pillar Masters lower down into their columns

and Torm is presented a puzzle to solve from each of the Eklipse Masters: The first puzzle she finds before her is a pyramid of ancient grey stone with symbols etched in light on each of its triangular divisions. She touches the symbols in a pattern that feels natural to her, with no thought to what the markings mean. The order she chose was correct and the pyramid folded into itself as its triangles bursted into disintegration. The second puzzle she challenged was the sphere. It had rings orbiting around it that she had to touch in correct order, again not guided by her intellectual mind but letting only intuition guide her hand. Her instinct solved it quickly. The final challenge was a floating cube with a misaligned pattern burned into it. In the blink of an eye her intellectual mind saw the solution. She turned the parts one by one into the correct order. On the eleventh and final turn, an exploding light finds its way into Torm from the Eklipse Masters. Her body was pulled into a hover by her heart and her skin became patterned with blue symbols, ancient languages, and pathways like a circuit board. The chakra centers of the Eklipse Masters cycle through illumination as they tune Torm's chakras. The chakra lights glow intensely through her skin and clothes as the tuning frequency cycles.

When the transfer of light and knowledge is complete, Torm is dropped out of the hover and the Eklipse Masters are swallowed by their suns. The stones retrograde their transformation and return

Torm to ground level. Torm looks up with weak eyes and then faints from exhaustion.

26

FIANTO

Large arrows hit the ground near Torm's body. Then one lands close to her head, waking her up. Torm jumps to her feet. She has no memory of the Eklipe Master ceremony but is confused by her surroundings since she went to sleep in a valley mountain and now is in a golden field. Another arrow hits the ground where the now missing Eklipe Stones once stood. Blurred in the distance heat, a Fianto Shepherd is running towards Torm, yelling out and firing warning arrows with a large bow.

“Kona, kona!” (“Watch out, watch out!”) the Fianto Shepherd calls out to Torm.

Torm runs and hides. Moments go by and Torm is looking around for the Fianto Shepherd but can't see her. Suddenly Torm notices a reflection in a puddle. The Fianto Shepherd is behind her. Torm quickly stands up to run but is stopped by a bowing gesture from the Fianto Shepherd. Torm notices her bag is by the Fianto Shepherd's feet. The Fianto Shepherd points to the field. Torm looks at the field. The Fianto Shepherd leans toward Torm and whispers.

“VORO.”

A large herd of ASMR elephants and other animals

are made visible when Torm hears the word. In awe, Torm walks closer for a better look. She turns to the shepherd.

"I would have been crushed." Torm says as she comes back to the shepherd. "You weren't trying to kill me, you were warning me."

The shepherd nods yes and hands Torm's bag to her.

"Hiding them keeps them safe, but dangerous for those who can't see them." the Fianto Shepherd says in response.

"Wow... They are amazing, so beautiful. How do you hide them?"

Grabbing a handful of earth, the shepherd answers.

"There are certain words when whispered that can charge the fields with an energy that hides them from your mind."

"Can anyone say these words?"

"Yes, but only a Fianto can set the energy into the fields."

"Fianto? The Fianto are thousands of miles to the south. What brings you so far?" Torm asks curiously.

"These animals are a ransom that will free my brother. I am to wait here until I see a signal. Red for wait, blue for go!"

"Who has him?"

"The father of his bride to be who took him captive after she died before they could be wed."

"But the family still demands wedding gifts or there will be war if this tradition is not kept." Torm finishes the Fianto Shepherd's sentence.

"Yes. You know of our customs?"

“Very little. Only what I have read in books... But I had no idea about this.” Torm states as she looks at the animals.

“Hm! Books are *your* people’s way of hiding things.”

“How did your brother’s bride die?” Torm asks.

“Her body was eaten by a black lava.”

“Shadow Fever?”

“No... a new evil... a new darkness, a new death. Killing the herds, crops, our people, anything it touches. We don’t know what it is, but this is the third time trying to pay the ransom and if I fail, my brother is dead.”

Torm sees the Fianto Shepherd secretly trying to gauge her trustworthiness by a purity stone she wears around her neck.

“Am I trustworthy?” Torm asks blatantly. The shepherd feels a small shock of guilt, but is not afraid of being caught.

“I don’t know. White means you are trustworthy, black means you are not.” the shepherd responds as she holds up the purity stone to Torm’s view and sees the gem is clear.

“What does that mean?” Torm asks.

The shepherd looks for an answer in the stone, then looks at Torm when she has one.

“Whole world trust.”

The shepherd sees a fiery blue light explode in the sky.

“Blue. I go!” she declares. The shepherd picks up some more dirt and puts it in a bag. She whispers to

it and hands it to Torm. The Fianto Shepherd gestures to her own eyes, then the field, showing Torm this will help her see. The shepherd gives the bag to Torm as a gift and gently puts her forehead against Torm's head, a traditional way a Fianto shows trust to a friend before they part. The shepherd rejoins the herd and Torm watches them disappear into a golden horizon. Just then the compass in Torm's pocket grows warm indicating it needs attention. She pulls it out of her pocket and it shows her an image of four pillars.

27

GATE TO PALACE

After four days of looking, Torm is no closer to finding the four pillars suggested by her compass and she finds herself right back where she started. She takes a moment to extract a little water out of the ground with her hand-held extractor but when she sticks it into the ground, the tip breaks off. Wasting four days was already frustrating enough, she didn't need another thing going wrong. She dug the tip out of the dirt and then went in deeper to see what had broken her extractor. A large, hard object was hidden under the dirt. Her first thought was that it was a rock, but the way it knocks from her digging at it sounds more wooden. She discounted a large tree root since there weren't any trees big enough to have a root that size, so she kept digging at its profile like an uncaredful archeologist with two left feet, hungry to get a bone for his museum.

After two minutes she had unearthed a large circular platform. There were no markings on it and it was quite featureless. She stood in the middle and pondered what it could be. Then the hairs stood up on the back of her neck when she thought this could be what she had been looking for the whole time. She

retrieves the Fianto Shepherd's dirt and fertilizes the platform with it.

"VORO." she says to the air then holds her breath as a wind blasts past her and the field falls away into the sky, revealing a long bridge leading to a beautiful white palace. The base she stands on is now guarded by the same pillars from the compass image. Torm had spent four days looking for a place that she was already in for items right under her feet. Torm walks to the palace on the sky bridge and comes to a large set of doors that opened as she gets within entry distance. Her curiosity overpowers her reason and she enters joyfully.

The large doors shut behind her as she enters the main hall of the palace. Its levels are constructed of a dark, maroon-colored wood that is organically ornate. Museum halls are stacked on top of each other like ship piers in a deck of cards. Rows of collection rooms line the halls and hold everything from medical organs to ancient types of dust. There are so many rooms, it would be impossible to visit them all in a single lifetime. Torm enters a room where she finds a machine that looks a lot like a piano-sized music box. Next to it is a box of glass plates. She thumbs through them and sees one with music notation etched on it, one with flip books of people dancing, and one with just words. Torm wipes off some dust gathered on the machine and examines how it works. She can see they are meant to be loaded into the machine. This triggers a memory of her sister:

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Dream Machine

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Torm is in her lab extracting fluid from her sister's eye.

"Tell me again what this is for?" her sister asks.

"Just wait, I promise you will be amazed." Torm responds.

"It must be amazing. I've never seen you so giddy." Torm puts the fluid extract onto a machine, fuses with parts, then ushers her sister to a seat.

"Sit right here."

Her sister sits down.

"Okay, are you ready?" Torm asks.

"Yes." her sister responds.

Torm hits the last switch that makes the light come on. They watch images appear from her sister's dream.

"Is this?" her sister asks in awe while standing up to get a closer look. Torm is silent with an excited face.

"You have found a way to extract dreams and record them?" her sister asks in amazement.

"Now we never have to forget them! And we can finally see the ones we can never remember!" Torm responds.

"This is amazing! I don't know what to say. My sister, the dream catcher."

.....

Torm comes out of the memory and splices some wires from the machine into a powerline, feeding light in the room. Fearing to be discovered by the new amount of light cast by the resurrected machine, Torm's spy bumps into an object while trying to hide. Torm looks in the direction of the noise.

"Who's there?" Torm demands. An Old Woman slowly comes out of the shadows.

"I'm sorry if I scared you. I haven't seen anyone else in here for a very long time." the Old Woman responds. Torm relaxes at the sight of this sweet Old Woman's face.

"What is this place, where are we?" Torm asks.

"The Palace of Collections. A museum of absolute greed; the trap of the cruelest thief you'll ever know."

"Trap?" Torm asks.

"Oh yes, this place opens its arms freely and lures you in but the way out changes as soon as the doors close behind you.. The interior structure changes, shifting its halls, keeping its exits secret. And if its keeper was still alive, you would have been held in an assessment trial to see what the 'Queen of Collections' could steal from you and add to her museum. Like she did to my son."

"Your son?" Torm asks warmly.

"The reason I'm here. The Queen of Collections took him, and has him locked up in here somewhere." the Old Woman responds. "You have to be careful in here because even though the Queen of Collections has been dead many years, her traps are very much alive." the Old Woman Warns.

"Why did she take him?" Torm asks.

"Infinity Blood! Do you know what that is?" the Old Woman responds.

"It's a nickname for a very rare blood type whose cells age very slowly." Torm answers.

"Exactly. She thought that with his blood she could steal time itself; be able to live forever taking everything from everyone."

"No transfusion has ever been successful, the host always rejects the blood." Torm adds.

"That didn't stop her from trying."

"Forgive this next question but..."

"But what makes me think he's alive?" the Old Woman interrupts.

"Yes." Torm responds respectfully.

"I can feel his heart beating. A mother can feel her child's heartbeat through the thickest walls of hell. And I know he's alive."

"How old is your son?"

"My son, Ori, is 65, but won't look older than just a boy. All I want to do is set him free before I die so he doesn't have to be tortured by an infinity."

"MOTHER!" Torm and the Old Woman hear a distant voice cry out. The Old Woman steps quickly to the door and yells out for her son.

"Ori?!!!"

She looks at Torm.

"It's my son." she declares disappearing out of the room. Torm quickly follows.

"Ori? I'm here. Where are you?" the Old Woman desperately yells. "Whatever you did to power that machine must have set him free." the Old Woman tells Torm. They move quickly through the halls calling out his name.

"Let's split up but stay tethered to each other by the sound of our voices." Torm suggests. The Old Woman agrees and they go in different directions. Torm can hear the Old Woman calling for her son, but soon her voice grows dim and she can't hear it at all.

"Hello? HELLO?" Torm calls out but gets no response. Her attention is stolen by the most intensely shaped door construction she has ever seen.

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Golden Hall

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Her compass flashes from her pocket. She pulls it out and is shown an image of the round door she now stands in front of.

"What is through that door? Is it a trap, like the Old Woman warned me about?" Torm thought to herself. But the overwhelming feeling that whatever was behind the door had something to do with her sister told her to go in.

As she walks up to the door, it opens up like a flower blooming, revealing a long deck leading to a podium tower where a golden violin hangs. The room is in the shape of a floorless cylinder, trimmed with the same organically ornate, gorgeous wood framing as the rest of the palace. Torm makes her way slowly to the podium tower and cautiously steps onto it. She inspects the golden violin and finds it has no top plate and its body is filled with machine parts. Against her better judgment, she takes it down for a better look and not a few seconds later, alarms go off. Torm takes a step back to the deck but it pulls away from her and she is marooned on the tower. In the distance she sees the door unbloom while the entire room transforms into a complex music machine. A large holographic screen comes up in front of her and displays a ticking countdown over an electric

hum. Empty music notation lines and a treble clef appear on the screen. She quickly finds the violin's bow and takes possession of it, knowing she will be forced to play. "Sight-read or die." she thinks to herself. The countdown comes to its last few ticks and Torm positions herself to play: 3..2..1.

The room erupts into an animation of machine parts and lights as she sight-reads notes drawing fast on the screen in front of her. The music is a style close to baroque with a fast tempo and clear rhythm. She saws away at the strings while her fingers perfectly dance on their correct positions. The music is challenging, but not unplayable and she manages with relative ease until the notes stop drawing. When the music stops Torm rests her arms but her anxiety is woken when she sees a new countdown start. "How many rounds are there to this audition?" she thinks to herself.

The sound of the machine's arms form an almost deliberate rhythm as the room transforms. A set of floating holographic MIDI controls appear at her sides which she quickly studies between the tick of the countdown. A single line staff is added below the conventional five-lined treble staff. Growing more nervous, the clef of the new notation is unfamiliar to her. She rehearses her movements to the hovering controllers and then takes a ready stance on the penultimate click of the countdown. ...2...1.

The music machine explodes into a mechanical rave as powerful dubstep fills the room. Reading from two clefs, the conventional notes give her no problem, but

the complex note heads and figures of the “dubstep” notation proves more difficult. She cuts and stabs the air with her bow and complex holographic shapes grow from the traces of its strokes. She holds the violin with her chin while rotating the holographic MIDI controllers with both hands. She misses a few notes on the controllers and is punished with painful force field blasts from the screen. But with only a few mistakes and with remarkable instinct, she mastered the dubstep notation and holographic MIDI controllers in only a few errors’ time. And soon she passes this section of the test.

The screen retracts and the room remakes itself. But the complexity of the new transformation takes longer than the previous two and Torm is given a few moments of rest. The air around the room becomes polluted with snapping lights as the machine programs itself. By intention or mistake, Torm is shown the holographic dossiers of the countless musicians the palace has trapped and coded into the machine. She stands in awe and terror at the variety and number of musicians who have been stolen: everything from primitive people with simple clay flutes to electro-mechanical humans with complex sound generators. But she is pulled out of spectation by the rise of several holographic screens. Two beams of light scan her body and Torm forms a trio with two holographic projections of herself. The machine arms set in and the final countdown ticks: 3..2..1. The music comes at her as a hybrid of dubstep, classical, and modern orchestral. With its

tempo fluctuating between 120 and 240 BPM, Torm and her flickering clones eat the music as fast as it comes, forming a trio of measure masters who dominate the counterpoint of assassination-heavy wobbles, diminutive-toothed rhythms, low-born glissandi killed by high frequency ostinati, arpeggiated quadruple stops that burn the bow over a series of unforgiving chord progressions, steel comb tremolos cutting hard into a sea of endless rhythmic permutations, and countless diatonic and chromatic runs over mean modulations whose patterns have no predictable shift.

Soon the clones' parts run out and Torm is left playing solo against the overpowering opus. But intoxicated by accuracy and completely precision-drunk, Torm keeps the murder-hungry machine at bay with perfect accountability for every note. Relentlessly the machine keeps turning, trying its hardest to eat out the substance of her musicianship but Torm holds to the tests and the machine is forced to abdicate. The notes stopped drawing, the sound cuts off, and its arms pass over her safely as the machine folds itself up. This wasn't just a test or a trap: it was the most complex key to a room she will ever use. Torm is lifted up through an opening in the ceiling where she finds herself in the heart of the palace: the Throne Room.

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Throne Room

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Her compass shows an image of a torch rod. When she turns around to see the entire expanse, she is startled by the Queen of Collections' dead body sitting on her throne. Torm notices the torch rod in the Queen's hand so she puts down the violin and moves to fetch it. Fearing a trap and a test, she hesitates to pull it out of the Queen's hand but when she takes possession of it, no alarms come. But unknown to Torm, a set of cold, red eyes awaken in a room not far from her. The Torch Guard has been alerted and will soon make his way to the Throne Room.

Torm notices a flash-burnt machine on a table nearby. It has several plates with strange objects that appear to have been grown from them. They are mechanical, but melted like cold candles. One is in the shape of a clock, another in the shape of a tiny waterwheel. As her curiosity roams over the objects she suddenly sees her father's book on the table. She quickly takes possession of it. When she opens it, the pages are empty. "Blank?" she thinks to herself. Her heart starts to sink but then a few symbols on the book catch her interest.

“Book are your people’s way of hiding things...” the voice of the Fianto Shepard echoes in Torm’s memory.

“Not blank but hidden”. Torm thinks to herself with enthusiasm as she studies the book’s symbols. “An optical lock?” she asks herself. She gets the idea to use “Persistence of vision”: She stares at a symbol for ten seconds, long enough for the symbol to remain as an image in her eyes. She quickly moves her sight to another symbol overlapping the tracer over it. She then peeks in the book but nothing changes so she tries another symbol and repeats the process. She tries several combos before the book reveals its words and illustrations. She can now read the pages. The mysteries of her father’s mind fuels Torm’s intellectual adrenaline as she reads the pages of her father’s book and studies its diagrams.

Torm is unaware of the danger coming her way as the Torch Guard marches towards the Throne Room. Moments later she pulls her head out of the book and her eyes open wide as she gives the objects on the plates another inspection. “He was pulling objects out of dreams.” she says to herself. “My father was building a machine that could make dreams a reality?” she says to herself out loud when suddenly the Torch Guard appears at the door and blasts at her. She instinctively uses her father’s book as a shield. The book explodes when it catches the blast and throws Torm to the floor violently. He marched towards her with murder in his steps. He raises his weapon like a sledge hammer. Torm covers up but

the Old Woman appears behind the Torch Guard and pulls his weapon down onto him. His body shatters into a dusty fire forming a beautiful disintegration whose thousand firey feet tickle the floor, cooling into zero. The Old Woman's face steps into Torm's view.

"The devil's gone, dear!" she states while helping Torm to her feet. Torm feels a deep relief and smiles warmly at her. Torm gathers the remains of her father's book, just corners and random burnt pages black with smoke.

"My father's book." Torm proclaims with sadness. "I'll never be able to see what he could have taught me. The diary of his life's work, gone forever in a million pieces on the floor."

"Nonsense! His knowledge is in you, his knowledge is you! You don't need a silly book to know what he thought. His genes will give blood to your lessons." the Old Woman states.

"Maybe I was just hoping it was more of a diary of his last moments; that maybe there was something in there that could tell me how he and my mother died." Torm catches a glance of the Queen's eyes. A sudden rush comes to her. "There is a way to know what happened!" she states. Torm quickly gathers spare parts around the room and gathers them at a table. She constructs a chemical projector. She inspects the Queen's eyes and finds they are made of glass. One is broken with a hole in it but the other is untouched. Torm quickly finds a tool and pulls the untouched glass eye out of the Queen's head and

returns to her projector. "I use a machine at home to inspect my sister's dreams, hoping to gain insight into a cure for her Shadow Fever. Maybe there is a memory that can be extracted from the Queen's eye that can show what happened to my parents." she explains to the Old Woman. Torm takes a dropper from her bag and retrieves a few of her own tears and drops them onto the chemical plate of the machine. She then cracks the glass eye like an egg and drops its sticky fluid on the plate. She mixes the eye drops and eye fluid together and then positions the lens of the projector. She connects some bare wires coming out of the projector to some raw wires on the floor that were exposed by the Torch Guard's blast. The projector comes to life. A life-size hologram is projected of the Queen forcing Torm's father to build a dream device that can make objects out of dreams.

"Horta nakta joif forza gialza mio eon tro dews! Forza siet set uie gonkert terta! Gio cioz zar heot lombink zoen rotgritra! Toz wer ion zufer!!" ("Build me a machine to bring me my dreams! I won't have to steal the world to build them! You have the knowledge I need! Build it or she will suffer then die!!") the Queen orders. Torm's mother is shackled and screaming in pain from the touch of an electrical current that is sent over her body through her shackles. The current stops and her mother is hanging on her wrists, too weak to stand.

"You can't build it. She's going to kill us both anyway. We can save others... can't give... power of real dreams." Torm's mother is too weak to finish

her sentence then she screams in horrible pain as another dose of current takes her body over.

"Zu trir gul tiz! Hueitra ko ko si tra." ("You can stop this. Make the machine work!") the Queen states to Torm's father. Desperate and with a feeling of helplessness, Torm's father reaches for his wife from across the room unable to crawl to her because of a foot chain around his ankle. He pleads with the queen:

"Okay! Okay! Just stop...please...stop!"

"Don't build it. You can't." Torm's mother pleads to him just barely strong enough to speak. He looks into his wife's eyes.

"Don't worry, I'm not very good at what I do because everything I try ends up better than I imagined." he says to her. She finds enough strength to smile remembering that she once said that to him as a reproach. She understands this message: He doesn't intend to give the Queen the machine. He stands up and reaches out his hand to the Queen for a tear. She pulls one from her eye with a finger and drops it onto the plate in his hand. He closes his eyes and imagines death. He looks at his wife.

"I love you." he says as a goodbye. She looks at him with absolute love and tears in her eyes.

"I love you." she responds for the last time. He takes some drops from his eyes and puts them into the machine. It overloads then it explodes. The hologram cuts off. Torm's sadness from seeing her parents forced to do what they did grows into anger. She runs to the Queen's body and shatters it with the torch.

Torm falls to her knees in tears. The Old Woman comes to her.

"It was the only way to save you. She would have pulled out her nightmares and killed the whole world of its dreams. Your parents saved everyone by what they did."

"But why my parents? Why were they even here? Why did the universe want them to be here so they could die?"

"Die? No such thing! Blood dries, but souls don't. There are things not even the universe could steal! Charity, compassion, love, family. So just because someone is dead doesn't mean they don't need someone to take care of them. Their story isn't over..."

Torm's compass flashes.

"And neither is yours." the Old Woman states looking at Torm inspecting her compass. Torm takes comfort in those words. Her compass shows an image of the throne. She examines the chair.

"Thank you for bringing my son back to me." the Old Woman says with a deep heart. "

Where is your son?" Torm asks.

"I sent him home through a Rainbow Stone. He is with his father." the Old Woman gestures to the throne. Torm finds the throne is made of Rainbow Stones. She concludes that the Rainbow Stone is some type of transport and that she must travel through it somehow. She sits in the throne and can tell it is activated by a finger-worn touchstone on its arm.

"What will you do now, go home?" Torm asks.

"I will decollect this museum, even if it takes the last minutes of my old blood. So many families with a chapter open or unread."

Torm takes a breath, preparing for the unknown effect she is about to experience and the unannounced destinations she is about to travel.

"Thank you for saving me!" Torm says with a warm heart. The Old Woman replies with a warm smile. She can see Torm is nervous about the chair.

"Don't be nervous of the Rainbow Stone. The colors are warm and without rush. You will be delivered safely."

Torm anxiously nods then touches the Rainbow Stone. She dissolves into a flash of rainbow light. In the middle of the dissolve, Torm could see the Old Woman's glowing soul. The Old Woman watched the energy in the chair fade away and then stayed true to her word: She went immediately to send back all that was stolen by the Queen of Collections.

28

AVIO AT THE FALLS

The wind has pulled Avio far in the last few days and he quickly approaches the Great Falls, or what is left of it. He tries to get a signal on his radio trying to find answers about what is happening on the ground below. Avio passes a floating golden skull with an oxygen mask on it which is a warning beaker cautioning of pirates. A random signal takes over his radio and he hears Sand Pirate chatter. He sees the falls are destroyed with that same black crust as his friend was. "Pirates could do all this?" he asks himself. A signal breaks though. "Hello? Is anyone there?"

Signal static. Then he hears pirate chatter and a giant storm ship comes into view. High-powered turbulence violently pushes Avio's balloon in all directions and nearly shakes it apart as the storm engine ship grows in from the atmosphere. Avio hides into his carriage and pokes his spyglass through a bag to see but not be seen. A scavenging party of pirates launch from the ship and descend onto the crust-cradled ships in the once lively harbor. They look for anything of value like hyenas after a lion kill. The Gold Mother watches as her pirates are

taken over by the black harbor crust. She knows this is something she can't fight, so she orders a retreat immediately. The exit of the storm ship adds to the already uncontrollable winds and sends Avio rocketing upwards across the black rocks of the Falls.

29

GIANT FOREST

A flash of light collects around a large rainbow-burnt stone and Torm emerges from its system of layers. The energy dissolves into the stone and she finds herself on a canyon tower where a long rope bridge leads into a vast forest. Her compass calls out and Torm is shown a picture of the bridge that hangs before her. She puts the compass away and tightens up her belongings, but she wasn't just going to step out onto that bridge and have faith that it was a well-meaning stranger. She tested the bridge with a kick. Years of its dust skin find relief in the wind. She then takes a rock and launches it into the middle of the wooden planks. It breaks straight though, falling to its death 1,500 feet below. She stands silent with eyes wide open, unable to blink out of shock.

"No more tests, or I'll never want to cross that bridge." she tells herself. This would have been a walk of pure trust and zero common sense. Torm had never been afraid of heights, but she had also never been so high on a questionable bridge holding hands with a stranger and found herself developing a new talent for acrophobia. She would need 500 yards of distraction, since that was the distance of the bridge.

She put her mind on a book she had read about the mysteries of the Giant Forrest called "Speculations on the Origins of Giants." A large work documenting mostly the myths and tales about the creatures that supposedly live in the Giant Forest, the reported behaviors that happen there and the folklore of how the trees got so oversized. And though the book was without a real scientific method, she found the colorful illustrations depicting strange animals and wildlife excellent and the folklore entertaining and sometimes creepy. Officially the forest had been long off limits due to concern about the wildlife preserves, but everyone knew it was because of the high amount of suicides that occurred there daily by people either seeking a doorway out from their pain, or a doorway in from the curiosity. A problem so bad that steps were made to distribute fake maps leading people away from the forest.

But Torm was there trying to save her sister. She kept a strict tempo and dynamic to her footsteps as she crossed the bridge. She managed to keep her mind busy for a while but then suddenly and without warning, her reason started a conversation with her anxiety: "If I were to fall, I would feel no pain since the force would be so great I would be unconscious before the pain could ever register to my brain, or perhaps a safety blackout would occur and my consciousness would be absent when my body hit the ground. But, on the other hand, I could remain wide awake during the deathly fall and somehow survive the distance and be in great pain, but be

unable to move and..." before her panic could take flight, her stomach tapped her on the shoulder and hunger overtook the voices of reason and anxiety. A hundred belly growls later, she finally makes it across the bridge and she is greeted by a fresh, comforting pine perfume in the air.

The forest is larger than the imagination and deeper than thought. Where the shadow and light from one branch could keep its own seasons. A series of rope bridges hug the trees with pathways running through carved out tree tunnels. She finds a row of tree pots hanging on a wall of bark. She sees dry colorful residues ringing around their plates. Torm tears a piece of bark from the tree face and discovers a sweet-smelling, rainbow-colored sap. She immediately recalled a citation that she had read mentioning a sweet flavored bark used to hydrate climbers on long journeys in places with little water. She took a dangerous chance on her belief that it was the same gum mentioned in the citation, biting off a piece of the bark and letting her teeth, tongue, and cheeks harvest the water from its sap. This did wonders to fight off her thirst, but only teased her hunger.

She continued down the tree-held lanes while chewing on the bark pieces and soon came to a bush of berries growing in a small abandoned forest vineyard. The high-hanging farm was built on long rows of hanging rope decks anchored from tree to tree. The small bush was the only thing left of the vineyard vegetation. Based on the deliberate way in

which they were grown, Torm concluded there was a good chance they were edible, so she picks a few. Not wanting to let herself foolishly ingest something that might be deadly, she took a small bite from one and then waited 30 minutes. Feeling no ill effects after the 30 minutes, she started eating them as fast as she could pick them. She quickly picked nearly the whole bunch. Looking deeper, she saw a cluster of them in the back. She reached her hand in and started pulling on the vine, but found something tugging back. She repositioned and pulled harder, snapping the vine. Fruit falls to her feet and a little furry creature runs down the vines to the floor, hiding behind a branch railing. It pokes its big eyes out and looks at her. Torm sees it stuck between being afraid of her and wanting the fruit. She recognizes the creature from one of the illustrations from her book. It's an "Imifur". Torm kneels softly and rolls a berry over to the little furry creature. It nervously takes the fruit and runs off. Torm chases the little Imifur from a respectful distance through the forest vineyard.

Torm reached the little animal's home: a hollow tree knot with a little room made in it. She sees the little blue Imifur try to feed his mate the berry, but she is at death's door and too weak to eat. Soon she closes her eyes and her soul escapes her pink ornate body.

"Nooooo!" her blue mate pleads with a tiny, but sad voice as he tries to grab the soul with both hands, but it only slips through his fingers and floats away. Heartbroken and unable to say goodbye, the little guy

runs after his mate's soul. Torm is moved to tears from what she just witnessed and immediately her thoughts go to her sister. She tries to imagine things going right, not realizing that things are actually worse for her sister: The crack in her sister's vapor machine had grown larger and was releasing vapor in large amounts and soon the entire supply would be gone. But Torm knew none of this and convinces herself that everything is going well.

Torm notices a rather large "Woodant" trying to get across a railing where the branch had broken. Torm replaces the broken branch with a large sturdy twig. The Woodant crosses it and is soon followed by a whole army of Woodants. This small act of aid, in proxy, gave some relief to the feeling of helplessness that Torm felt by not being able to tend to her sister. Seconds later, she gets another chance to play nurse: A broken-winged "Leaf Fly" on the ground, struggling to fly. Torm softly picks it up with two fingers and puts some tree sap on its broken wing. It starts to struggle in her fingers.

"Hold on little fly, almost done." she whispers. It settles down as Torm blows on its wings which hardens the mend. Torm softly returns the Leaf Fly to the ground. It gives a few test flaps to its wings then is able to take off in flight. It circles Torm's head once as a way of saying "thank you", then flies off.

An "Endglow" steals a tear from Torm's eye. Torm itches it away and watches it return to a small swarm of Endglows. She observes a deliberate pattern in their flight. She stepped a little closer to

get a better view when she hears the sound of her sister's voice tuning in through the buzz of their flight. And in the mist of their fast flapping wings, Torm sees a memory of her sweet sister play like a projector floating on a smoky screen:

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Fireflies

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In the forest by Dreamer Village, Torm holds out a "jarstick", carefully trying to catch a firefly, hovering by the exposed roots of a large river tree. She pulls the lid rope but the firefly gets away. She tries a few times and fails to catch one. Her sister approaches.

"How many have you caught so far?" her sister asks. Torm holds up her jar with a disappointed look on her face.

"It's tricky. They are shy little critters. How many have you caught?" Torm asks. Sister grins as she holds up a jar full with fireflies in each hand.

"What's your secret?" Torm asks jealously. Her sister holds up a small bottle of nectar.

"I put a little flower nectar in the jar. They just fly right in and don't want to leave. They come to me instead of me going to them!"

"You cheater!" Torm declares while marching over to her sister and taking the bottle out of her hands.

"Cheater? I didn't know it was a contest. I thought the idea was to catch as many as possible. Are you jealous?"

"Of course I'm jealous! That was extremely clever! It's so simple I should have thought of that." Torm responds.

"Well how fair would it be if you were always the clever one, and since you made it a game, then points go to me. HA!" Torm pours nectar into her own jar and gives the bottle back.

"Here, go find more. And quickly, we don't have much time left. We have to get back soon."

"What are all these for?" Torm's sister asks.

"I'll show you when we get home."

"Not even a hint?"

"Nope, hurry." Torm responds impatiently.

"Ouch, don't be so crabby." her sister goes off to catch more fireflies singing happily down the trail: "Off I go, to catch more flippy flappy things that fly and glow."

Torm tries the nectar in her jar but still has bad luck.

"This nectar must be broken." she comments to herself. Torm hears her sister scream:

"TORM!!!!"

Torm drops her jar stick and runs into the forest looking for her sister. She finds her sister laying on the ground in pain with an overture of black veins of Shadow Fever covering her body.

"It burns! It hurts! It burns!" Torm's sister cries.

Torm pulls out a water container and pours water on the spots.

"Does that help at all?"

"Yes! It burns, Torm!"

"We need to get you out of here." Torm comments to her sister. She helps her sister onto her feet but the burn-pain is too much and her sister drops back to the ground.

"AHHHHH!" Torm's sister cries in deep pain. Torm quickly draws an idea in her mind of a branch stretcher.

"I'll get you out of here, be strong, sister.

"Please hurry, Torm!"

Torm quickly builds the stretcher and carefully helps her sister on. She pulls her sister through the forest like an ox pulling a plow. The projection frame rate slows down as the flapping wings of the Endglow slow down. Torm sees the rest in slow motion.

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The projections dim away and the swarm of Endglows disperse. Torm knew that compounds existed in certain animals that allowed "neurological derivement" to occur, but she never imagined that an animal as small as an Endglow could create the effects, she had just been witness to, so consciously and with what could only be observed as purpose.

Relaxing her position to ponder, Torm leans against a railing but it breaks away and she falls backwards over the side. Her mind goes blank and with more

preparation than fear, she anticipates the impact. But she is saved by the arms of a soft, mossy swamp. It takes a few seconds for Torm's mind to unblank itself and for her to realize what had just occurred. She sobers up and discovers a scary dimension about herself: she doesn't pass out or close her eyes while falling, exactly like she hypothesized might happen earlier on the bridge. And if it wasn't for the friendly cradle of a soggy swamp, she could have been killed. Or worse, crippled and suffering. Not wanting to inconvenience the swamp and its moss any further, she tries to crawl out but her efforts only sink her more. She is forced to hold still while her eyes search around for a solution. She sees the tiniest little set of critter feet struggling to get out of the moss. She pulls the legs and places the little "Upbloom" on her shoulder to keep it safe. The little Upbloom cleans itself off then suddenly launches up into the air, blooming into a flower parachute. It tries its best to clear the mire, but falls back into the same situation. Torm comes to the rescue a second time and the Upbloom manages to clear the swamp.

"At least one of us made it." Torm thinks to herself. Not a minute later, and before Torm can find a solution out of the moss, she is rescued by a line of "Whistle Sticks" that form together and pull her out like a loaf of bread on a conveyer belt. They deliver her to a dry bank at the edge of the swamp where she is met by a collection of helpful creatures. A "MudEater" cleans her up like a dog licking a treat. Her bag is fished out of the moss and brought to her

by a small group of “Propeller Heads”. She is warmed up by a circle of “Glow Ertels” and “Lava Stems”, glowing turtle-like creatures and the others are small, heat-producing mushrooms that walk around on their hands. A ring of Propeller Heads hold Lava Stems in the air and form a heater fan that dries Torm off. Torm had made new friends. The illustrations from the book are strangely accurate and so far she has been able to identify most of her new friends:

1. Imifurs
2. Whistlesticks
3. Endglows
4. Propeller Heads
5. Lava Stems
6. Upblooms
7. MudEaters
8. Glow Ertls
9. Forest Ant
10. Leaf Fly

Torm is exhausted from the adrenaline and passes out in the caring arms of her new friends. A few hours later, she wakes up to the sound of her compass. She has been returned to the path in the trees and finds all of her things cleaned and placed in an orderly fashion next to her. Her compass is brought to her on the backs of Woodants. She carefully takes possession of her direction-finder and stands up to receive its instructions. She puts a

hand out to the railing but quickly moves back, remembering the fall. Her sudden anxiety calms down when she notices it has been repaired. The compass shows a picture of a cave entrance. She gathers it would be out of the forest, but the paths are so numerous that she feels a bit "overchoiced" and struggles to choose an educated direction. Her broken-winged friend returns and Torm feels glad to see it.

"Do you know where this is?" Torm asks rhetorically not expecting an answer. But she soon finds out how wrong she is: The forest fly disappears in the dark distance and seconds later the forest lights up in patterns too deliberate to be natural. "I guess you *do* know where it is." Torm states surprised and thankful. Long lines of Endglows fill the forest air and Glow Ertels walk in choreographed paths on the forest floor. Countless wild plants luminate the direction of the path. She lets the show of lights guide her for hours, trusting their beautiful and complex patterns. They lead her to a large broken bridge that protects the way to a cave entrance. She compares the image in the compass and it is the same. But the span from her to the entrance is a sightless depth with no way across. She sees some "Whistlesticks", strange critters with tube-like exoskeletons attempting to play a tune, but one of them fails to play a note in the sequence. Torm helps complete the piece's performance by whistling the missing tone. They flutter and bloom in excitement. They fly away and join a group of hundreds in the

air and make beautiful music. She whistles her mother and father's wedding song and their dance creates a bridge to the other side. Torm keeps whistling and singing to keep them dancing until she reaches the other side.

30

CAVE

Torm crosses the Whistlestick bridge and enters the cave. 50 feet into the cave, Torm is met with steps cut off and an old iron tram. She puts a foot on it to see if it is stable. The old rusty cables are hard to trust but seeing no other way, she is forced to get on. She releases a break lever and the tram car starts moving, squeaking and squealing rust and debris fall onto her. She covers up and then brushes it off. Mindful of the speed, she keeps her hand on the break wanting to get off the ride as soon as possible but any faster and she might snap the cable. Seeing the end she feels a little relief, but to her horror the cable stops. She tries to swing it loose but it doesn't budge. About 75 feet away to safe ground, she gets out and nervously climbs across to the other end. The rusty cable bites into her hands but she ignores the pain. Just as she steps off to safety, the whole rig falls. She looks over the side and sees it falling violently. But her fun is not over. Further in, she comes to another high ledge but this time only small thin pipe poles form a way to walk across to the next ledge. Torm tucks in all loose items of clothing and tightens up her shoes. She keeps her mind blank as

she counts her steps because her balance is so delicate, a thought could tip it. She manages the tall path without a problem and counted 26 steps. Torm comes to a cylinder brick wall that once had a staircase leading to the top. High above it she can see ledges and old "star carriage" paths. She studies the walls and finds a worn out metal disk on it where a turn handle used to be. She peeks in through a notch and sees the disk attached to a mechanism of wooden gears and iron rods. She surveys the area around her: some old bags, rebar, and a shovel with no handle. She inspects a pile of mine rocks near her and discovers they are magnetic.

A flash diagram comes to her mind of a solution. She fills an old mine bag up with some of the rocks and attaches a piece of rebar to it. She ties a wooden rod on the bag. She lifts the bag up to the worn out disk and the magnetic rock is aggressively attracted to it. Torm turns the homemade key and a set of old beams open out of square holes around the wall forming a staircase. Torm makes her way up the staircase, careful to watch her pressure and balance.

Reaching the top of the staircase, she finds and climbs a series of tall ladders up to a path of ledges that have since rotted away, leaving only the support beams and a handful of planks. Torm hugs up against the wall and walks sideways slowly down across the ledges. She has to jump a few times where the planks are completely gone but manages to make it all the way to safety.

Now 400 feet above the cave floor, she comes to a

set of hanging star carriages. They have small round platforms that rest on an iron beam shaped like the letter "J". She manages them with little effort, rotating them to move from one to the next stepping from carriage to carriage. Once she steps off the last one, she looks back at them expecting them to fall, but they don't. And in a strange way, she is disappointed they don't.

She makes her way across a long rusty path that hangs high in the loft where she is led to an electric machine hall. The pathway that would have allowed her to pass safely across to a set of doors has completely fallen away. The only way across is a "carriage dog" that connects high-powered charges of electricity to a set of large transformers coming out from the walls. She thinks to throw something into the transformers, but it could have very unpredictable results so she resolves to borrow a ride from the carriage dog. She insulates her hands with rags so they resist a conductive connection. She then puts a scrap piece of wood onto the carriage dog's top plate and pulls on it to see if the wheel still turns. She backs up and practices a few dry runs to the carriage. Feeling that she has rehearsed as good as she can, she runs with all her energy and jumps onto the carriage dog. It screeches down the rail attracting a cracking buzz as each transformer fires a sphere of energy to its twin on the other side. Torm stands up seeing that the track runs out but notices a chain-hooked hovering wire above her. She jumps off the ride and hangs on the ripcord chains, riding it

all the way where she drops and covers up on a safe solid platform. The hall explodes with a symphony of devil tails, cracking their hammer whips against anything that will conduct, pulling the hall into the hell below. Torm uncovers and looks over the edge and sees the dangerous mess below. She is glad she trusted her instinct not to try to discharge the transformers before her ride.

She makes her way through a set of rust iron doors and finds hallways of stone walls. Mostly empty rooms, she explores the maze of halls until she finds a room with three large iron wheels with an axle through them. She can see they are meant to turn, but what for she doesn't exactly know.

She examines the room for a way through, but is unsuccessful. She looks down the wheel's shaft and sees a small square opening. She jumps down into the shaft to examine it more. Suddenly the large iron wheel starts turning downwards. Torm is in danger of being crushed. She escapes through the small opening by wiggling her way through just in time. It's a tight, small tunnel that leads to a doorless room.

Her compass cries for attention, showing a symbol. As she looks around the rooms for the shape in the compass picture, she unknowingly steps on a stone that triggers the opening to shut. She runs to it, but it's too late. A sad, tortured, glowing, one-handed, Jewel-Skinned Man with a walking stick, lurks around the outside of the stone room, keeping quiet and hidden from Torm. She feels the edges of the brick wall for a way out and presses a stone. The

room shifts arrangement, but she is still trapped.

"Why are you here?"

Torm hears a voice call out in "Inotra", a language from the east. Torm is frightened by the man's voice and quickly moves away.

"Hello, who's there? Can you help me out of here?" she asks the hidden stranger in his language.

"Why are you here?" the man repeats. Torm follows the sounds of the man's movements, catching occasional glances through the stones.

"I'm seeking something, but I really don't know what it is I'm looking for." she responds honestly.

"Looking for something to make you rich.... Looking to pawn my scars to fund your dreams. Like all the others!"

"What do you mean? I don't understand."

"LIAR! It doesn't matter now!"

A sudden rush of flashbacks hits his memory hard: 1. Stones being pulled from his skin. 2. He is shackled and tubes and pipes stuck into him, pumping out jewel blood. 3. Crystal testing... skin stretched back, painful scraping. Men talking about purity and bartering a price. 4. Jewel Breeders ("Bring in the whore!" a rough male voice says.) Trying to push back the aggressive memories, the man's body is completely flexed, forcing blood out of his scars. Blood that turns instantly to crystal when it hits the rocks below. Torm hears that he's in pain.

"Are you okay? You sound hurt." Torm asks.

"What do you care about my pain? What do you care about my life?"

"Please... If you are hurt and in pain, maybe I can help you."

"You are trying to trick me to let you out."

"I'm not trying to trick you, I promise you. If you are hurt let me help you. You have nothing to fear. I won't hurt you."

The man has a flashback of a "jewel scraper" preparing a stretching table. "You have nothing to fear, I won't hurt you..." the scraper says. The flashback ends.

"Nothing to fear? You have no idea what my life has been like. A constant misery. Being cursed with skin that no shadow can hide. Having it stretched back by rusty pins and clamps while your muscles are scraped with dull plates. As you cry out in torture, they smile at you... having no family, no friends, no name... just a dead thing that pays well."

"What? Is that what has happened to you? Who has done this to you? That is terrible.. you poor soul. I would never hurt anyone like that." Torm says.

"It doesn't matter why you're here. If you can find me, so can others."

The man runs away.

"Wait! Please! Don't leave me here!" Torm keeps looking for a way out. She presses another stone and the room shifts again. She pleads through the bricks.

"PLEASE! Can you tell me what this is?" Torm draws the symbol from the compass on the wall. Moments go by. She hears painful breaths of the man lurking.

"I am sorry, I will never tell anyone where you are.

Please help me out of here."

The man sees the symbol on the ground which triggers flash-backs of his slavers abusing him. He struggles through them and moments later comes out of the fit and settles down.

"Please! I know you can't trust me because of the horrible treatment you have been through, but you have to believe that I am not here to hurt you or to make myself rich."

"I will never trust any of you."

"Please, I am not like the others. ...Are you okay? Please take it easy, you are hurt. You sound like you are in a lot of pain. I can help you."

"Your words are lies... meaningless..." the man's pain cuts him off mid-sentence. Torm finds the control stone and activates it. A large stone entrance opens revealing the Jewel-Skinned Man, breathing in heavy exhausted pain.

"Why have you come? Why did you have to come here?" the Jewel-Skinned Man starts to move slowly towards Torm. "You have stolen my walls from me. The only walls of peace I've ever known. Walls that keep men from painfully harvesting my skin like wheat... Shifting their crops from field to field, keeping their soil fertile." His anger builds. "They would pull stones from my back, throat, stomach, my eyes." He grabs Torm's throat and chokes her in anger.

"YOU ARE ALL THE SAME! I WILL NOT LIVE IN PAIN ANYMORE! I will make sure you never tell anyone where I am."

The man falls to the floor, too weak to complete his intention. Torm helps him.

"Here, lay here."

She takes her cape off and makes a pillow for his head. The man panics as Torm reaches in for her tools, the same tools which remind him of his abuser's tools. He grabs her arms, but grows weak quickly.

"I only need to see the makeup of the crystal structure. I have something that might help with the pain." Torm reassures the Jewel-Skinned Man. He gives in, too weak to resist. Torm takes small samples off his body and tests it. "'Diatride Alkaline.' Similar to the fever." she states then takes out some mineral powder and pours it on the man's wounds. It helps immediately and he relaxes. She puts the vial of powder next to him.

"Does it help?" Torm imagines his abusers pulling stones from his back, stomach, and eyes as she examines his body. "What did they do to you? It looks like they were careful to take just enough not to kill you."

"Does death save me? Do cruel hearts become kind when they enter heaven, or is hell waiting for me in the clouds? Here, in these unhurtful walls, I was safe from man and heaven. Until you came and brought all the nightmares back."

Torm looks down in shame.

"If I would have known I would never have come. I don't want to add to your pain. What they did to you was unforgivable." Torm expressed.

"Why are you looking for that?" the Jewel-Skinned Man points to the symbol she drew on the ground.

"Honestly I don't know what I'm looking for. I don't know what that symbol means, what it represents, or what I'm supposed to do with it."

"But why are you looking for it?"

"For my sister. She has Shadow Fever. I need to get the rivers flowing again so I can make more of this." Torm points to the mineral vial. "Without it, she will die. And without her, I will be all alone in this world. I don't know what to do, and I don't know why I'm here."

The man becomes silent in thought. He looks at Torm's tears and then the symbol. With a sad tone, Torm states:

"I'm sorry what for we did to you. With all the love that I have, I promise I will never tell anyone where you are."

She gets up to leave, but the man grabs her arm and stops her. A tear falls down his face turning into crystal. Torm wipes it away as the tortured man wipes her tears away.

"You are beautiful." Torm says softly. His body starts to change color. He looks at the symbol on the ground and then lifts up a cloth covering his chest revealing his Heart Jewel surrounded by the same symbol on the ground.

"You didn't come here to steal my jewel to make yourself rich, you came here to borrow my light to save your sister."

He pulls his Heart Jewel out of his chest. The cavity

is quickly grown over with new young crystals as he completes the excavation. He holds the heart out for Torm. She notices the shape on his chest is the one from her compass.

"I can't take this, it doesn't belong to me." she states.

"It does now." the man responds.

Torm reluctantly takes the gift and caringly packages it in a cloth and puts it into her bag.

"Thank you." she says softly through gentle tears.

The man presses a stone.

"I've just opened the south door. It will be your quickest way out. Save your sister."

Torm hesitantly leaves his side, looking back with caring eyes and pausing.

"Thank you. I will bring this back to you, I promise."

"Go... your sister!"

Torm exits and the man leans over in pain quickly losing consciousness. His body solidifies into crystal; he is dead. The Child of Light appears through the wall and greets his soul as he comes out of his body. He is at peace and safe now. They walk away, vanishing through the wall. Seconds later, a group of Sand Pirates find the crystalized body of the Jewel-Skinned Man and as they try to collect him, he shatters. Although the pieces turned to common stone, they collect them anyway.

31

HUNGRY SHADOW

The Shadow Cloud was eating its way over every town, village, farm, and valley that it could get its hungry hands on:

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The sky was painted with the constant flight of rainbows around the Palace of Collections as the Old Woman “decollected” the museum. She had been using the Rainbow Stone transports to send back the bodies and possessions that the Queen had stolen. Little did the Old Woman know that the places she was sending decollected possessions to were all taken over by the Shadow Cloud. Soon the Black Shadow ate the rainbows mid-flight before devouring the Palace of Collections. The Old Woman herself was frozen in death while trying to escape through a Rainbow Stone transport. At least the palace would never be able to trap anyone else again.

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In a bright moonlit field, the Fianto Shepherd notices something is bothering her animals. Glowing in the dark, the elephants and other animals are in a circle protecting a young elephant who has been cracked by the shadow. The shepherd orders them to move. They move and the calf is relieved. The animals become nervous and agitated. Seconds later, the Fianto is taken by the Shadow Cloud, then the animals.

.....

It's well past midnight when the Professor arrives home exhausted and in shock. "What is the world doing?" he thinks to himself. He spends the next few hours working trying to keep his mind busy so his thoughts don't turn negative. His method becomes sloppy and increase in error. Most of the hundreds of plate samples he processed had to be discounted for mistakes in his distracted procedure. "Don't speculate about the danger, just keep working." he tells himself. But as he continues to check plates, the shadow grows out of his bag that was unknowingly contaminated when he was looking for his friend at University Circle.

It comes out and crusts over his room, his instruments, and then his body. It then finds its way to the entirety of Dreamer Village, taking every villager into its arms and strangling them with its dry black death. Finding its way to the hospital, it climbs the tall old walls and seeps its way in through the

windows following a flat wide path over the walls. The shadow finds the nurses and creeps slowly up their slumber chairs, killing them one by one with its dry black hug. Their skins frozen with cracks as its melting heat dries their bodies. Having done its work in that room it finds the halls to the other rooms, repeating its recipe on everyone. One last room remains: the nursery.

Felsik is sleeping in his chair. He wakes up from the crackling noise of the growing blackness taking over the hospital. The infants wake up from slumber, crying from the rows of cribs. Felsik sees the blackness enter the room and spread on the walls. He sees it growing towards the babies. He prays to the universe to give him the strength to protect them, but before his prayer was over, he found an energy come over him. He struggles out of his chair and falls on the floor. He sees the blackness take over the cribs. One by one the babies' cries are silenced. He crawls across the floor racing the blackness to the last crib. He struggles but manages to stand up at the last crib trying to protect the last infant. With struggled speech, he orders the blackness away.

"No!...no!...no!", but the void disobeys and petrifies him in a black crusty dust. It grows past him and quickly takes the last infant. The hospital is now gone.

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Because of the mineral vapor filling the small room, the Black Shadow had moved around Torm's house, ignoring it until now. Having no one else left to take except Torm's sister and because the air had cleared of the vapor, the Black Shadow could now enter with immunity. It finds its way in through the cracks of the front door. It crawls over Torm's sister's bed and into her body. The Shadow Fever veins break out of her skin trying to defend its prize from confiscation from the hand of a stronger monster. In her dream the fever veins appear as ornate black irons rotating around her arms like a snake. But the Shadow Cloud quickly eats the Shadow Fever, claiming the sister's body. The fluids in her body evaporate and suck her skin to its bone. In the dream the white flowing cloth becomes black silk and wraps itself around Torm's sister in a beautiful cocoon of death. The Shadow Cloud has killed her in life and in dream. Torm's sister is DEAD.

32

WEST DESERT

Torm finds the south exit to the caves and discovers it leads to the West Desert. She checks her compass for a new message: It doesn't show anything. She puts her compass away and descends a large sandy hill which climbs to the opening of the exit. She notices a large storm cloud but doesn't realize it's actually a pirate ship. A blast suddenly knocks her to the ground. A Sand Pirate comes straight at her and she panics. She starts moving as quickly as she can on her hands and feet, but it quickly catches up so Torm covers up. Just as the pirate gets within striking distance, he explodes and Torm is covered in sand and debris. She opens her eyes and sees the Old Man that saved her from Ivan the Eater. As he helps her up, she spots pirates behind him.

"BEHIND YOU!" she yells gesturing for him to look. The Old Man turns around and is greeted by three Steampunk Pirates running at him. He efficiently distributes his staff and one by one gives them their gift of destruction. But in the horizon, he sees a crowd of pirates charging towards him. He takes one step forward and hammers his staff to the ground. A powerful shockwave races across the

desert floor, destroying the oncoming army of pirates and knocking Torm unconscious into a dream:

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The Old Man looks deeply into the desert night seeing a montage of silhouettes and flickering shadows. He speaks to the warm air:

"Oh world, break my heart and bring me better dreams. My credit with Heaven is poor. They send winds to punish my life. Wind that is cruel, twisting the architecture of my soul. A wind that if I see it, I know I did not find her, but at the same time a wind that if I see it, it promises to show her. That is the cruel irony of the wind of Heaven. Her image desires to see my mind, but I am aged beyond the fertility of its purse and the image of her beauty gets lost in a dance of shadows, but this painful flicker cannot spend the gold of my heart. My love makes me rich forever, even if the banks of my eyes crust over with dust and are closed forever. My body is not ready to accept her death and my feet won't let me read her will. Oh where are you??? If I could just see you once more, if I could just view that face which had brought me so much happiness, I would stop seeking you in this world and give the remainder of the glass to the lips of Heaven!" The flickering shadows become black flames burning Torm's sister in silhouette.

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"Sister!" Torm yells as she is pulled out of the dream. She is confused by her surroundings. She is now in a desert camp. The Old Man fans iron particles in the air with his hands.

"Good, you're not dead. I thought I killed you!" the Old Man states.

"How long have I been out?" Torm asks.

"Four days." he replies.

"What happened?"

"I blasted all the pirates to hell and almost you with them."

Torm looks around in a slight panic.

"My bag? Where is my bag?"

"Behind those rocks. You must have something they want really bad for them to send so many after you." the Old man comments. Torm moves quickly to her bag and checks the contents.

"Is everything in order?" the Old Man asks.

"Yes." Torm remarks, relieved.

"Too bad!"

Torm understands his meaning at once.

"Because the pirates will be back." she confirms.

"Because the pirates will be back." he repeats. Torm checks her compass for any new images. The Old Man watches her looking for a signal, walking in different directions holding it up.

"You won't get a reading...I've put up iron emitters

to blind us from the pirates' patrols." he explains. She tries in spite of the Old Man's info but doesn't get anything to come through. She puts it away and takes out his vial.

"Thank you again for saving me. You always seem to be there just as I need saving." Torm says sincerely to her new friend. She gives the Old Man his vial. He reaches for his neck in surprise, not knowing that he had lost it.

"Where did you find this?" he asks. Torm takes out her compass and continues to look for a signal.

"In the forest where we first met." she replies.

"Forest? Impossible. I've been in this desert longer than you've been alive."

"Don't you remember cutting my ropes? You dropped this and I ran after to find you, but I couldn't."

He looks at his vial as he walks to the edge of the camp and looks into the horizon.

"I would be lost without this."

"What is it? Is it a breath vial?" Torm asks.

"A compass to her soul." the Old Man responds softly.

"Her?"

"My everything that is, was, and ever will be. My wife. The reason I've been in this desert so long. The only thing left of her; Her final breath. Until I felt the warmth of this vial I never believed in a soul. I accepted that there was a hand around every sun waiting to turn out every light that was ever made. But when this vial gets warm, I know she is near;

When it grows cold, I move to find where her soul roams. But with every year looking to grasp any light that might be her, her image grows dimmer in my mind and I fear I'll not be able to recognize her. Her face is just a few grains from sunset."

The Old Man's eyes are closed with tears running down his face. Torm moves close to him and steals a tear with a small glass dropper she uses to collect her sister's dream tear samples. The Old Man quickly opens his eyes. She mixes a tear of her own with the Old Man's and puts them on a glass plate she developed for dream extractions. She gives the extraction some time to develop.

"My sister has Shadow Fever. She is the reason I am here. The fever violently takes over the entire body, painfully strangling every nerve. But as it grows, it sends a chemical trigger to the mechanism in the brain that controls dreaming. So the only consolation for knowing the person you love is going to die a painful death, is knowing they had beautiful dreams."

She gives the Old Man the plate. Torm's compass sends a message and she quickly moves to see what it is. He looks down at the plate and sees it has a picture of his wife on it. He can't believe his eyes. He looks at Torm in awe, then back at the picture.

"Time had started to fade your face, but you have been returned before that sun set." the Old Man says warmly to the picture. He looks at Torm with warm eyes as she looks in the distance for the object in the compass: a tree limb with a single copper leaf

hanging from it. The Old Man takes his staff out of the ground and moves to her. He holds up the picture of his wife.

"I don't know how you did this. But whatever you are seeking in this desert, I will help you find it."

33

YOU'RE A DREAMER

High in her giant storm ship, the Gold Mother is looking through a periscope. She spies down like a god from a cloud at her Pirate Patrols in the desert searching for the Old Man and Torm. She grows angry when she sees giant areas that her pirates pass without inspecting. She puts her periscope up in frustration.

"Fafi siot met rea!!!" ("*!@# &@*! #*@ @#!!!")the Gold Mother rushes fast down her ship's halls past rusty rooms shaped like grenades and walls made of tarnished pipe.

"Where are my jewels??? Fly fly fly! Find my jewels!" she orders. Like ants, the pirates pour out from the tunnels and load flyers. One by one, they launch out of a docking bay and into the sky.

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In the desert the Old Man and Torm hide behind a rock waiting for a Pirate Patrol to pass. Torm stands

up but the Old Man holds her back.

"Not yet." he warns. The Old Man watches the patrol pass.

"Okay." he says, letting go of her. "If the pirates follow the same pattern as they have these last three days, they will sweep this area again in one hour." the Old Man remarks. Torm holds up the compass to compare the picture of a tree with anything that might match in the area.

"Three days of hiding behind rocks doesn't make it easier to find anything." Torm says. The Old Man scrapes the ground with his staff.

"Patience! We will find it." the Old man replies. He catches a string in the dirt with his staff. "Torm! I've found something." he announces. Torm puts her compass away and rushes to see what he has found. "Look!" he points to the ground. Torm sees the string and pulls on it, leading her to a buried box. Torm digs it out and finds a box full of junk. Dust cards, dirt, and sand. She dumps it out. The Old Man hears his wife's voice. He looks at Torm and sees that she didn't hear it. He clenches the vial around his neck and looks into the distance.

"My sister is running out of time! And I'm chasing dirt! I feel like I'm just letting her die!" she remarks in frustration. The Old Man's vial grows warm. He talks to his wife.

"I feel you." he says to the air. He turns to Torm. "My wife speaks to me. What we are looking for is here." He turns back to his previous view and speaks to the air again. "One more word, so I know you're

not the wind." The Old Man closes his eyes in sad joy. Torm sees a warm smile explode on his face. He opens his eyes and looks at Torm. "It is here." he says with sureness.

"Where? Nothing can grow out here. There hasn't been a drop of water out here for years. I don't understand what I'm supposed to do."

"You are a dreamer, so dream! Imagine it is here and it will be!"

Torm reflects on his suggestion and then closes her eyes to dream while the Old Man stands guard.

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Seconds later, she smells Nag Champa. She opens her eyes and is in a dream. She is in the desert, but the sky has changed color and the Old Man is now a statue of a king sitting on a throne. Small orbs of light and blurry dust accent a spiral staircase standing in a small pond, waiting for her in the horizon. Stepping stones leading to the spiral staircase rise a few inches out of a dry, thickly cracked desert floor. The earth around the stones eat away in a brilliant fashion from the weight of Torm's steps as she makes her way to the staircase. The stones stop at the edge of the small pond where Torm notices the water is only an inch or two deep. Her footsteps make glassy tones at different pitches as she walks across the pond while

a line of cattails bloom into tiny ballerinas that float away with the breeze. The staircase is a dry hard concrete made of old sand, rising 50 feet above the desert floor and leads nowhere.

Torm walks up the "nowhere ladder", being careful to stay near the center since there was no railing to lean against and the pond was too shallow to safely fall into. When she reaches the last step, desert angels ascend from quicksand whirlpools bringing Roman style columns up from the desert floor, creating a path high in the air. Torm steps onto each newly-risen column as they make their way into the sky. The cape of the last angel breaks into a sandy wave and spreads out over the horizon forming a sea of sand. The column Torm stands on becomes a small boat with shadows for sails, whose dance pulls the boat across the soft swell of the newly-formed ocean of sand.

She passes small rock islands that hold large sand masks of her sister's face where birds have nested and flock out like patterns of hair. Seahorses and unicorns of sand breach the surface while giant rose stalks climb into the sky, blooming rose angels from the skin of their glowing petals who dance with the colors in the sky. With a liberal amount of attachments, an obese circus unicycle bobs its way across the ocean with a paddled wheel while holding countless knick-knacks, objects, and animals including snails, fish, and umbrella mobiles, leaving a cluster of sand castle formations in its wake.

Colossal windmills empty the sea of its sand and

Torm's boat becomes a platform carried by a giant creature with a leg for an arm and an arm for a leg. Torm and her faceless gargantuan make their way forward in a valley of melting moonlight that is protected by two deep sleeping mountains of sand, whose genders are both female and who are mothers to giant castles of sand built on the back of massive animals and great red arches that touch the sky.

Moonlight waterfalls fall over floating islands and melt golden streams into the eye sockets of these sleeping matriarchs. Pools of liquid gold stream down their face, feeding a moat around a tall tower at the back wall of the valley. When Torm reaches the tower, her ride's toothy tongue grows out and becomes a stone bridge staircase leading to the tower of the moon. As Torm walks over the bridge, glowing threads grow out of the mother's eyes and into the air flying over a large gate behind the tower. Torm opens a door to the tower and instantly the large gates open up and Torm finds herself the captain of a steamboat castle. As the ship walks slowly out of the gates, with legs controlled by cables and pulleys, Torm witnesses a strange crew defending the ship from a weird enemy in the middle of a surreal skirmish in the air: Hair-fed gatling guns fire off rounds of instantly woven parachutes against a threat of angels eating uncooked umbrellas straight from the air. Torpedoes are dropped onto the ground below the ship causing dry volcanoes to erupt into air balloons that become clocks the higher they rise. Grenades launched over the side explode mid-air into

cloth rainbows. An angel uses a hand loom twisting hundreds of threads into missiles that launch as fast as water from a sprinkler.

Torm deframes her view and withdraws as witness to the wild weird war of fabric wrapping when her attention is wrangled by the sight of a giant wall of water. The "sideways ocean" forces a liquid negotiation that dissolves the ground into space and makes the ship disappear from its heavy promotion into thick puffy clouds. The sand walls of the castle tower fall apart into a gold dust galaxy that reincarnates as a smoky island of white with a single peach hanging from a leafless white tree. Torm snaps the peach off and eats its sweet flesh convincing the tree to grow around her body, tailoring a clothly, branch-lined dress and replacing her legs with old desert trees.

A celestial isle forms from growing vines as Torm rides a floating island in the middle of a mystical purple nebula. The final staircase of acquisition is made and Torm walks up its branch steps into an isle of sunflowers made of old desert trees who hold holographic energy charts and ancient languages in their crowns. Torm makes her way down the isle where she sees the tree from her compass. A trunk branch forms a heart-shaped, headless fountain sink at the foot of the old tree which is half full of glittering water. Torm places one hand into the water causing the bodies of two lovers to grow from a network of veins into a loving embrace in the middle of the tree. Torm's hand forms roots as it drinks from

the sink, giving water to a growing branch from the hem of her dress. A copper leaf grows and Torm takes the deeply hidden token needed for her journey.

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A few seconds later, Torm opens her eyes, and is out of the dream. In her hand is the copper leaf. Not realizing the futility of her acquisition since her sister was already dead, there would be very little reason to try to find a cure for Shadow Fever.

"You can reach into a dream and pull out something real." the Old Man states.

"That scares me! What if I can bring a nightmare out?" Torm replies concerned.

"Then we shall break that thing into a million pieces and bury every last piece in this desert."

Suddenly a powerful blast from a Sand Pirate lands near them. Torm quickly puts the leaf into a leather bag.

"You were saying?" Torm states sarcastically. Torm and the Old Man gather their items with haste. Torm's compass makes a sound. She nervously checks it. It shows a picture of a "Puzzler's Key." The Old Man looks over at the compass.

"I know where this is!" he states as he points in its direction. "This way, quickly!" he urges. They run off and are chased by Sand Pirates. One emerges

from the sand but the Old Man's senses are powerful and sees the pirate's movement in slow motion and prevents the attack before it happens by smashing the pirate with his staff. A Sand Pirate races across the desert on a flyer, chasing them while they run.

"Are you sure you know where this is... how much further!?" Torm asks. The Old Man quickly turns around to her but looks past her.

"Not far, I promise. Duck!" he yells out. Torm drops to the ground as he destroys the pirate flyer that was chasing them. "Why are you laying around, lets go." the Old Man says sarcastically. Torm jumps to her feet and they climb up a rocky path that leads to a view of the Puzzler's Key. "There! Quickly." the Old Man says gesturing to the Puzzler's Key. When they reach the bottom of the hill they are met by a large pirate craft emerging from the sand. "Step back and cover!" the Old Man orders. Torm covers up and the Old Man destroys the craft with a blast from his staff, covering them in debris. "Almost there, quickly." the Old Man pleads while running. Torm shakes of the debris and follows him.

Moments later, they reach the Puzzler's Key: a rusty set of rectangular metal parts standing on a base of gears whose parts connect to other bases like a back vault safe buried in the desert floor. Torm looks at her compass and sees the image in it matches the large object she now stands in front of.

"What is this? I have seen this a thousand times but I've never known what this is." the Old Man says to Torm.

"It's a Puzzler's Key." she replies. She sees he still doesn't know what that is by the look on his face, so she further explains. "It's an interlocking puzzle consisting of notched shapes, combined to make one three-dimensional unit used for everything from toys to securing vaults. But I've never seen one this big. It would take me months to figure it out." Torm states. The Old Man sees the oncoming pirates riding a machine whose silhouette forms a kind of metal lionfish.

"I'd say you have about TWO minutes." he responds. Sand Pirates come out of the sand and attack the Old Man. He makes quick work of it. "Make that one minute." he declares. Torm steps up to the Puzzler's Key and closes her eyes. An intense focus takes her over and she starts pushing and pulling the rusty parts of the key. The Old Man continues to fight off the pirates as she works. Torm is knocked down by the key but from the view on the ground gains an insight to the pattern of movement. Torm quickly jumps to her feet with the solution to the key but fails to notice she has lost possession of the compass, which now belongs to the desert floor. Within a minute, she is able to solve it.

"I got it!" Torm declares surprised. The Old Man disintegrates a pirate with his staff.

"About time, I am getting bored." he states sarcastically. Underground gears shift and Torm sees another key come out from a base 100 yards away.

"Over there! Let's go!" Torm orders as she runs to the other key base. The Old Man finishes off his

current pirate and then follows Torm. Their bodies scatter into cubed parts as they step onto the key base. The key quickly retracts and they get away just before the pirates get within killing distance. A pirate finds her compass on the ground but when he picks it up, it disintegrates in his hands.

34

KING'S POND

Torm and the Old Man reform from blocks in a large round gate that looks like a comb nested in a hidden archway. They find themselves in a hidden place built like an old Roman spa, whose stone work cradles a pond. The Old Man recognizes this place immediately. He moves to the water's edge and kneels down in tears. He takes some of the water in his hands.

"Where is it?" Torm states in a panic. She looks for her compass but can't find it. "I lost my compass! We have to go back and find it." Torm turns back and tries to move the iron in the gateway but is unsuccessful. "I need that compass or I can't continue!" Torm gives up on the gate and has a feeling of hopelessness and confusion come over her. "Or is this all just a dream; Have I just been dreaming this whole time? What if the compass wasn't real..." She looks at the Old Man.

"What if you're not real." Torm continues trying her luck with the gate pole. "My sister could already be dead and I have no idea. Feels like I'm going nowhere. Just a string of long obstacles." Torm turns to look at the Old Man. She notices he is on his knees

at the pond's edge absentminded to her.

"When a King is born, the mother comes here and bathes in the water until it is time for labor. The water is pure and healing. The life in these waters keeps the child safe and clean." the Old Man says softly.

"How do you know that?" Torm asks.

"Because I was born here."

Torm looks at him with wonder and curiosity as he continues. "I was born to a life of luxury, I was a King from birth, I was given opportunities, nurtured, developed, but mostly I was loved. I was taught how to love by being loved by my family. Naturally when I married, real love was possible since I knew what it was. But nothing prepared for letting go!" He holds out his vial to Torm. "You feel this vial?" Torm feels the vial.

"It's cold!" she responds.

"Has my mind made me believe it was warm because I just can't let her go? But yet you are the proof, beyond my own touch, that the vial has been warm. You've given me hope and I don't know if letting go is the best way to hold on, where the strongest grip is an open hand, but I do know that Heaven gave us two compasses to find one place. We are where we are supposed to be or Heaven wouldn't have been so nervously accurate with its directions."

"But I don't have my compass anymore." Torm responds.

"You've lost your compass because its purpose has been fulfilled and my compass has brought me to you so I might find this pond and exit the world the

same place I entered it."

"Why does everything have to die in this world? I don't believe it has to. Why are the steps to Heaven so often cold and filled with pain. What strategy does death play to Heaven, to thin out the stars of an overpopulated universe to make room in the clouds for unhatched souls? Or is it simply to cause pain to those who love? At the blink of an eye, Heaven could uninvent death and stop the world's hearts from breaking."

"When I was young I kept ants. Journey ants. They have something not common among other creatures. When resources are scarce, they search for a better place. The weaker ants sacrifice themselves to keep the colony alive for the survival of all. The best kings are ants." the Old Man responds. "Crush half of the leaf and give it to the pond... give me the other half."

"Not if you're going to kill yourself." Torm replies sharply.

"I will step into that water and leave this world because I believe the benefit of our tragedy belongs to us and will show us a world better than we imagined!" the Old Man replies with love in his eyes as he holds out a hand for the leaf. Torm takes out the leaf she retrieved from the dream and breaks off his half and reluctantly gives it to him. She then goes to the pond, crushes the leaf, and blows its dust onto the surface. The water reacts to the glittering gold leaf dust and rumbles at its surface. The microscopic life feeds on it and Torm sees a dragonfly larva grow and fly to a nearby stone. The Old Man comes next

to Torm. The surface settles down. He eats the leaf. Torm knows exactly his plan: He is going to go into the water and offer his body as a meal to the dragonflies.

"There must be another way, you don't have to do this. I don't believe my next step has to be your last!" Torm pleads.

"No matter what world we find ourselves in, a Dreamer will always outrank a King. And you dear girl, outrank me to infinity." the Old Man says with a sincere heart. He steps into the water. "Oh world, break my heart and bring me better dreams." he recites to the open air. He walks slowly until his head is no longer visible. The dragonflies show respect to the Old Man by waiting for him to be completely submerged before they begin their meal. He sees a vision of his wife hovering above the water. The dragonfly tadpoles swarm around him and multiply as their mass replaces the image of his body. They tornado around him and then fly off, leaving nothing where he once stood. They race down the underwater channels of the pond and grow in flight, soon breaking the surface of the pond in a swarm of millions. Torm is knocked over by the explosion of water. A large dragonfly stands waiting for her on the pond's deck. She sees it opens its body indicating it is her vehicle. She gathers her things and makes her way up the pond stairs to the waiting dragonfly. She carefully crawls into its body. The dragonfly closes its shell and they take flight, joining the other dragonflies in great swarm.

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OCEAN LAKE

The giant dragonfly carries Torm through the sky over a montage of mountains and towns. The view becomes blacker as they near the Great Falls. She sees the trail of lifeless crusting and destruction caused by the black cloud of death. She ascends in her winged transport past large chunks of falling water, frozen mid-air in a thick tar crust, past the petrified harbors and black ship tombs. The higher they climb, the darker it becomes. Torm reaches for the light of the Heart Jewel, but stops when the dragonflies light up with glowing blood glittering through their translucent bodies in subsurface transmissions of light, defogging the black views in their path. Before long they reach the top and Torm sees what no other eyes have ever seen: a giant ocean lake at the top to the Great Falls. The source of life that every living thing has depended on for hundreds of thousands of years. The water is being kept prisoner by a dam created by the thick arms of the Shadow Cloud. Torm is more determined than ever to save her sister, but doesn't know her sister is already dead. But the resolution of the ignorant has a strange way of pulling the dead from their graves.

Dragonflies start to burn out as they hit the dark atmosphere looming over the ocean lake and Torm reaches the ground of a small rock island just in time as the giant dragonfly disintegrates around her. She rolls hard on its cold, rocky surface but recovers quickly. Water breathes heavily all around her and the atmosphere is dark and smoky but a few scattered pieces of fabric catch her eye. She follows them to the other side of the tiny island where she finds what is left of Avio's balloon: the regulator, still intact, and half of the balloon fabric, still attached to it. She wonders if the wreckage debris was carried by the wind, or if its pilot managed to bring it here.

"Hello!... Hello!" Torm yells out for a few minutes. With wind in her eyes, she tries her best to see through blasts of water into the hazy dark distance. "Is anyone there? Do you need help?" she yells out but finds no response to her calls. Like the Professor, she has a low-level immunity to the Shadow because of her exposure to the mineral vapor but soon it will start trying to put its death into her. She feels the Shadow Clouds start to bite her arms and cheeks as atmosphere grows darker and thicker. She takes out the Heart Jewel and attaches it to the torch handle which gives off a penetrating light forming a small radius that eats the atmospheres away like ink in a vacuum, giving her sight and relief from the sharp bites. She stands at the edge of the small rock island trying to get a better view of her surroundings when she accidentally drops her torch into the water. She quickly moves to grab it but is unable to intercept its

quickly sinking handle and it falls 400 feet to the lifeless sandy floor. Torm tries diving for it, but she can't hold her breath long enough nor swim that deep. Instantly a flash comes to her mind. Once on land, she immediately goes to Avio's balloon with hopes of making a breathing apparatus from its regulator. But when she lifts the balloon up, the cloth attached to it is snatched up and stolen from her grip by a heavy wind and flies away into the black atmosphere: first into an irretrievable distance, then into an unseeable one. Torm bites her jaw in frustration but quickly develops a new plan: She rips part of her cape and folds it leaving only a small opening in one end. She then takes some of the sticky forest tree tar left over from her visits to the Giant Forest, and uses it to seal the edges of the folded cloth. She fills the newly created cloth lung with ten large breaths and runs back to the water's edge.

The glow of the jewel penetrates the water, giving her good visibility to the bottom. She makes her way back into the water with the cloth lung in her mouth and a heavy rock tied to her waist. The weight of the rock pulls her down with good speed and it doesn't take her long to reach the torch. Once in hand, she releases the rope from the rock and floats back to the surface where she ties the torch to her hand so she won't drop it again. The light keeps her safe from the Shadow's grip but she knows in order for her to get the water free from the thick Shadow Cloud, she would have to find an edge of the waterfall.

In the strange dry water, which is both cold and hot,

Torm swims to another tiny island 50 yards away where she finds a cache of drift wood clinging to the rocky island's edge. She gathers the wood together and tears her cape into long, thin strips. She ties a raft together with the cape strips and wood then places it into the water. She carefully positions herself on the raft and finds that it keeps her afloat. She pushes off and slowly paddles with one hand while holding the torch out in front of her with the other. The light from the Heart Jewel eats a hole in the dark atmosphere as she cautiously moves along looking for the edge. Her thoughts turn to the tortured, sad man who gave her this gift and how it took a lifetime of pain to charge the energy in this light and provide her this moment of hope. A gift she hoped to return as soon as she could to prove to him that his worth went well beyond the value of the stones created by his body. And that she might have a chance to help rebuild his joy of life and repay him for his kind act of love.

Her thoughts break off suddenly when a hole in the Shadow Cloud opens up and a powerful rush of water is pulled through it, creating a current that is hungry to go over the side. Torm quickly covers the light up, trying to close the hole before she is also pulled over the side but the cloud is slow-growing and her raft is caught in the heavy current pulling her towards the edge. She jumps from the raft and swims as hard as she can, managing to get to a small rock island eleven yards away but her raft gets pulled over the edge and breaks apart over the hovering clouds

of tar ice. She looks back and sees the hole and wastes no time in taking advantage of her opportunity to free the water. She climbs to the top of the tiny island and holds the light out to the shadow dam.

Damaged by the light, the cloud pulls away, releasing a powerful torrent of water over the side. Unable to shake Torm with its own hands, the Shadow slips its fingertips into the water and stirs up large heavy waves that crack hard against the tiny island, hoping to destroy this little girl and her light. The violent walls of water knock her down over and over again but Torm's will to save her sister holds harder than the waves can crash and more balanced than the frequency of their constant hammering.

"SHE IS MY WHOLE LIFE, DON'T TAKE HER AWAY!" Torm yells not knowing her sister is already dead. "PLEASE LET THE WATER GO!" she continues to plead. The desperate Shadow pulls back the lungs of the sea, taking a deep silent breath. Torm is given a few seconds of peace before realizing an angry god is coming. Torm hears a mean water behind her. She turns around and is swept away by a god-sized wall of water whose weight's only intention is to kill. Fighting to stay conscious, she is held under by a current as defeatless as the sun. Her torch slips out of her hand and falls quickly to the bottom of the ocean lake leaving the edge defenseless and soon the Shadow mends the hole and regains possession of the Great Falls.

Slowly slipping into unconsciousness, Torm

descends to the bottom of the ocean lake while memories of her sister play in her mind: The laughs of the good times they had teasing each other, the deep loving moments shared by two sisters crying over lost parents, the hard moments watching her sister held prison by Shadow Fever. The hopeful moments spent dreaming on Catcher's Peak. But soon the energy fades out of her and the last thought Torm has before she dies is: "I'm sorry sister."

The Heart Jewel is swallowed by the swirling sandy floor of the ocean lake as Torm's floating, lifeless body catches the last few flickers of its light. Soon, the absence of any hopeful illumination colors the watery tomb the most complete black and the arms of the Shadow Cloud spread to every part of the touchable world, killing everyone and everything.

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GOLDEN CROWN

